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CAPTAIN BOWL, THE WHITE HOOD CHIEF; Or, SHADOWER JACK'S DOOMED SEVEN.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



"WHAT BROUGHT YOU HERE, ANYWAY? WHO GAVE YOU LEAVE OR LICENSE TO COME SKULKING OVER MY GROUNDS?"

Captain Cowl,

THE WHITE HOOD CHIEF;

OR,

Shadower Jack's Doomed Seven.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

GRIM DEATH LYING IN WAIT.

WITH a ragged bunch of withered grass vailing his head and shoulders, a rough-clad man was lying on top of a nearly naked rock, peering with fierce intentness through space to where, as yet only indistinctly visible to the unaided human eye, a small party of horsemen were leisurely picking their way through that rocky waste of foot hills.

Only an eye unusually keen, as well as one thoroughly acquainted with the lay of the ground in that particular direction, could have decided with anything of certainty whither that party were bound; but no doubts on this score appeared to trouble this grass-veiled spy, for presently he drew back, letting fall the cover for which he had no further use, making a triumphant gesture as he exultantly spoke:

"Ha! ha! come, ye purblind fools! Come to where the grim bridegroom awaiteth the feast! Come—come—come!"

Rapidly sliding back until the sloping rock afforded him perfect cover, the wildly gesticulating man arose to his feet and hurried away, seemingly without giving thought to his own peril, although the unseen trail which he followed was far better fitted for the clinging hoofs of mountain goat than for the shod feet of man.

Now he leaped across a yawning chasm, where the slightest slip of foot or mistake of eye could only mean a shocking death. Then he stooped to grasp a spur of rock with sinewy hands, swinging himself over an otherwise impassable ledge, to drop down a half-score feet, balancing for an instant on a sharp pinnacle where even a cat could hardly have found secure support, then springing boldly to another resting-place, all the time drawing nearer the bottom of that grim pass, where grimmer walls arose on either hand far up toward the lazily-floating clouds of summer.

At brief intervals a partly-smothered laugh came from his thin lips, with an occasional sentence which surely boded no good for yonder party of unsuspecting horsemen upon whose movements this strange being had been spying.

Now and then he paused to give a swift gesture of menace, of scorn, of anticipatory triumph—his eyes, large, but strangely sunken in their hollow sockets, seeming to blaze with internal fires, his tense lips curling back until white teeth showed themselves back of the heavy, ill-cared-for mustaches which he wore.

Intrusting his weight to a rock-rooted juniper for an instant, this strange being dropped to the bottom of the pass, laughing afresh as he recovered his balance; and now giving a low-pitched whistle, in answer to which a trim yet strong-built bay horse came trotting forward from the place where it had been left in waiting.

Stranger even than the man himself this beast would appear in the eyes of all the natives of that far Southwestern range, for its horse-furniture was better suited to the Park than the prairie, to the *menage* than the mountain-trails.

At one side of the hornless saddle hung a coiled lasso; at the other was suspended a Winchester magazine rifle, upon which those muscular fingers closed with almost ferocious ardor, their owner laughing once more as he sprung lightly into the saddle without touching foot to the hoodless steel stirrups.

A shadow passed swiftly by, and lifting his eyes, this wild man of the mountains caught sight of a buzzard sailing gracefully with its white-edged wings, its livid head and naked neck craning downward as though searching for its gory prey.

From one of the narrow defiles sounded the low-toned, melancholy howl of the mountain wolf, causing the horse to start and give an uneasy whinny.

"So ho, boy!" muttered the wild driver as he stroked that arching neck with soothing hand. "The scavengers of earth and of air scent the feast, but we are to furnish, not to form it, this time! Now—come, ye devils! 'Tis not a sleeping, unarmed man this time, but the pitiless avenger! Come! there's grim death lying in wait!"

A touch of the spurless heels sent the bay horse along the narrow, winding defile, those glowing eyes fixed upon a point far ahead where all further progress seemed barred by mountainous rocks.

Instead, the defile here took an unusually abrupt turn, just short of which the horseman checked his steed, gripping his ready rifle with both hands as he leaned forward in the saddle to hearken more intently.

Minute after minute passed without sound or signal, but that strained attitude remained unaltered until, faint and indistinct, yet unmistakable, there came the sound of human laughter from beyond that shoulder of gray rock.

Again his thin lips parted far enough to afford a brief glimpse of those white teeth, looking fairly wolfish when taken in connection with that fierce eye glow; then the wild rider worked the lever of his rifle far enough to see that a cartridge filled the chamber, after which he resumed his former attitude.

Little by little there came other sounds; the stroke of shod hoofs upon the flinty trail, the cheery laugh, the gay call of man to man; and then, as though scenting another of its kind in advance, one of those as yet invisible horses gave a sharp neigh.

Like an echo the bay stallion flung back that signal, sharply, defiantly, as it seemed. The rocks rung with the sounds, yet through them all the wild rider recognized the startling exclamation from at least one pair of lips beyond that turn in the mountain-trail.

A low, fierce malediction escaped the wild rider's lips at this totally unexpected betrayal of his presence by that neigh of his horse; but, swift to act, he sent his steed forward, rounding that gray shoulder with a rush, then jerking his mount back to its haunches as he came in full view of the startled party of horsemen, now less than one hundred yards distant.

They were three in number, all thoroughly armed and well mounted, huddled together in the middle of the trail, just as they had wrenched up their horses at the first suspicious sound; and even before that wild-looking, skin-clad figure dashed forth from cover, each man was grasping the weapon upon which he naturally placed the greatest dependence.

One fiery glance, then the avenger flung up a warning hand, shrilly crying aloud:

"Halt! Be ye men, or be ye devils—"

A hoarse cry from one of the little party broke into his challenge and with it came the words:

"The Bloodsucker! The Mad Detective! Kill him, or we're—"

The little squad fell apart as though by common consent, and he who yelled forth those fierce yet frightened sentences, hastily leveled his rifle and fired a shot at the wild rider.

His lead tore through the tangled locks of iron-gray hair which fell below that cap of wild-cat skin, but the Mad Detective laughed like one filled with joy as his own long rifle rose to a level.

"Ha! ha! I know ye now, Man-devil! I scented your coming from afar, and while returning thanks to Satan for— Ha! ha! ha!" his tones growing shriller, fiercer, more maniacal as he saw his destined prey turning to seek safety in headlong flight.

"Too late! Too late for all but— Die, ye devil!"

His weapon spoke, the sharp report blending with rather than drowning his wild speech, and without even a moan or a gasp of pain the doomed man plunged headlong out of the saddle, to lie a quivering yet lifeless heap of human clay.

All this might have been covered by the space of a single breath, and almost before the other two adventurers could realize the nature of the peril which threatened, rifle answered rifle, and one more death had been added to the bloody record of the Texas border.

That awful happening seemed to break

the charm, and as their comrade fell, the two survivors wheeled about in headlong flight, uttering cries of terror rather than of rage or of grief for the fallen.

Shrilly laughed the Mad Detective at this, and as he worked the lever to throw out the empty shell, his mocking tones rung forth:

"Too late, ye demons! The wolves and the buzzards are flocking to the feast, and though ye had wings of the wind, my vengeance— Ha! ha! Swift be the heels of your gallant steeds, but swifter far is the crack of doom! Now, ye devil—die!"

The breech-block closed with a vicious snap, and those wildly gleaming eyes took a death-glance through the double sights, now bearing full upon the bowed back of the larger fugitive; but no report followed, for something had gone wrong with the usually trustworthy weapon.

With a savagely impatient cry, the Mad Detective jerked back the lever to throw out that defective cartridge, but the shell jammed in the chamber, and his rifle was rendered worthless for the time being.

Brief though this delay was, it proved long enough for at least one of the two fugitives to rally in part from his superstitious terror, and swinging the muzzle of his rifle to the rear, he sent a bullet back with hurried aim.

Striking a stone not far from where the avenger sat his horse, the missile glanced off at an abrupt angle, its distorted shape splitting the air with a vicious screech which, once heard, can never be mistaken for aught else.

That shot appeared to warn the wild rider, for his eyes turned from disabled rifle to fleeing enemies, and the next instant he was dashing along in hot chase, guiding his steed by the pressure of his knees alone, hands busy with his weapon, eyes fixed upon his human prey.

Shrill his speech and wild his laughter as he mocked those fear-stricken wretches who, with hands and with heels urged their mounts to more speedy flight.

By this time the narrow defile had been left far to their rear, and now the nature of the ground grew more open, although as yet there was but one trail along which a horseman could flee at speed.

Still, not far ahead the rocks lay less thickly clustered, and coming to a point where the trail branched off to right and to left at a sharp angle, the fugitives separated as by mutual consent.

The Mad Avenger uttered a savage cry at this unexpected move and partly checked his bay steed while flashing lurid glances from one to the other; but his indecision was very brief.

Both were enemies, but one was more; and with another of his wild, insane peals of laughter, the terrible destroyer paid no further attention to the one who shot off to the right, sending his mount swifter than ever along the trail of the doomed wretch who had veered to the left.

The fugitive cast another look backward as though to assure himself that his change of course had worked as he wished, but that laughing, mocking demon of vengeance was hot upon his trail, and shivering with superstitious fear, he plied both whip and spur, riding as only one can who knows that his very life depends upon the heels or his horse.

For the moment relaxing his efforts to free the clogged working parts of his rifle, the Death-rider stroked the warm neck of his steed, speaking to the animal as one might talk to a well-loved and thoroughly-trusted mate of the human race.

"Watch him, Red Ghost! Follow his lead though it takes us to the lowest depths of Tophet! He is one of the death doomed! Follow—follow and catch, Red Ghost!"

The bay steed gave back a sharp whinny, as though in full understanding, then stretched out in still swifter chase, while its rider now bent all energies to repairing his repeating rifle.

Little by little the distance between fugitive and pursuer lessened, and when he saw that escape by flight alone was out of the question, the hunted wretch swung himself partly around in the saddle the better to handle his Winchester, opening fire upon that implacable foe.

The Mad Detective paid no heed to those

shots, although more than once he might have felt the wind of their swift passage, eyes and hands all busied with that crippled mechanism until, when scarce two-score yards of space divided the pair, a bullet came closer to the life it was aimed at, tearing a red-furrow along one muscular shoulder.

With a sound of fury which more nearly resembled the roar of a wounded tiger than aught purely human, the Mad Detective slipped his Winchester into its leather sling, then grasped reins and urged his horse onward, more like a demon than ever.

Shot after shot the fugitive fired, but if any of the leaden missiles found their mark they failed to check that savage charge; and then, with a scream almost as wild as was the cry of its insane master, the bay steed leaped squarely upon the fugitive's horse, men and beasts going down in a confused heap together, for the moment veiled by the cloud of dust and sand tossed upon the air.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAD DETECTIVE'S BLIND QUEST.

LIKE one who cared naught for his own bones, the Wild Rider made no effort to save himself when that terrible shock came, his sinewy fingers reaching for and closing upon the brown throat of his enemy, to which they clung with wonderful tenacity through all that followed.

Just how the feat was accomplished that dust-cloud masked, but an instant after the fall, the Mad Detective rolled clear of those lashing heels, bearing with him the desperately struggling fugitive.

Another swift turn, then the maniac crouched over his human prey, knees boring into his ribs, hands clasped about his neck in a perfect garrote, eyes fairly blazing as they gloated over that rapidly-discoloring visage, white teeth showing wolfishly through that ragged mustache.

"At last, ye devil! After so long a time of waiting, I have ye now!"

All at once the helpless wretch ceased his frantic struggles, for that pitiless clutch was doing its work only too well, and insensibility now took the place of horror.

Little by little that terrible grip slackened while the Mad Detective keenly watched the face of his victim, ready to renew the pressure at the first hint of trickery; but, gradually, the insane glow in his sunken eyes grew less vivid as he began to realize how complete had been his victory over this man against whose name he had years since placed the blood-red mark of a just vengeance.

Though looking so terribly like a corpse, the man was not dead, and after several minutes had crept by, his chest heaved with a gasping breath, then sunk again in a rattling, husky sigh.

His fingers worked convulsively, his legs cramped, his heavy lids opened to let his eyes stare dimly, uncertainly at first, but then to fix upon a slowly circling buzzard in the blue ether above him.

That foul scavenger of the air gave a hoarse croak as of inquiry, while its repulsive head and neck bent lower, the horny beak giving a clatter as though the bird was growing impatient for its promised feast.

A start and faint ejaculation of fear told of waking memory, and with uncertain movements those trembling hands sought for the weapons which customarily hung at his belt, his head and shoulders lifting a few inches at the same time.

He saw his jaded horse at a little distance, standing with bowed back and drooping head, worn out by the chase or disabled by its ending.

Hard by stood the bay steed of the Wild Rider, seemingly none the worse for chase or collision, but—

"That demon! Crazy Jack!" came through those livid lips, and, lent more strength by the awful memory, the fugitive lifted himself to a sitting posture while his hands vainly sought for the weapons which his captor had long since removed from his person.

"What do you miss, Oren Dupont?"

Clear and cold came the question, and as the frightened wretch turned his head swiftly in response, a choking gasp of horror told how surely he recognized that speaker.

"Mercy! Don't murder me!"

The Mad Detective laughed, bitter scorn filling each note though his blazing eyes

alone told how strongly his worst passions were being stirred.

His features were hard-set, scarcely less immobile than a mask of marble.

He was seated upon a fragment of stone, Winchester resting carelessly across his lap, while near by lay the broken and now useless weapons which he had taken from this, his second victim for the day.

Oren Dupont shrunk away, and possibly would have made an effort to seek safety in actual flight, but with a swift gesture the being whom he had in his dawning consciousness called "Crazy Jack," gripped his rifle by the butt and extended his muscular arm until that grim muzzle rapped head with a light but significant warning.

"Can your legs outspeed a powder-winged bullet, Oren Dupont?"

"Don't—I never—pity me, sir!"

"Such pity as you showed me that bitter black night, Oren Dupont?"

"I never—before Heaven sir, I didn't have anything at all to do with that dirty job! I never even knew they meant to whip—"

He broke off abruptly, for Crazy Jack cut in with a slow, sneering laugh which matched his frozen face well enough, but formed a startling contrast to his vividly glowing eyes.

"Your tongue betrays its master, poor fool! Could I ever forget? Had I not ample length of time in which to make a study of the devils in human guise who stripped me to the skin, then flayed me alive?"

"But all were—"

"Masked, of course," coldly supplied the Mad Detective as that fear-shaken wretch again checked his luckless tongue. "Although there were a full score armed knaves against but a single sleeping man, not one of them all dared to show face or speak in undisguised tones—at first! But later on—when their victim had been beaten to insensibility, his back flayed from neck to waist-line, his body bruised and bleeding, his poor brain—Ah, ye devil!" with a portion of that mad fire passing from eyes to voice as he started forward and dropped rifle to fasten his terrible fingers upon either shoulder of his helpless foe.

"Look me squarely in the eyes, Oren Dupont, and avow your innocence if ye can!"

"I never—before Heaven I didn't—do it!" desperately gasped the wretch, lying for dear life, yet even with so much at stake unable to deceive those glowing orbs.

"Would ye lie to me, dog?" fiercely cried the Mad Avenger, abandoning that forced calmness for the moment, shifting one hand from shoulder to hip, then swinging the craven wretch high above his head as though about to dash him down on the rocky trail again.

A howl of terror, a confused burst of speech, then Oren Dupont was deftly placed upon his feet, Crazy Jack laughing in cold contempt as he relaxed his grasp, drawing his gaunt form erect as he spoke again:

"Speaking falsely can only shorten your lease on life, Oren Dupont, while telling the whole truth— Can you do that, think?"

"They forced me, sir! I didn't want to hurt—I tried to get out of it all, but—don't butcher me, sir! Let me go—let me live on, and I'll be your dog for the length of my life, sir!"

In cold silence the Wild Rider listened to this half-unconscious confession, then lifted a warning hand before which the other immediately fell silent, cowering there before his captor in abject fear.

"Listen, you devil among devils! What was I then? What am I now? Time was when I envied no living mortal! Time was when all the world contained no more peaceful, contented, happy man than Waldene Rutherford; but now—listen, you whelp of evil!"

"You and your fellow bloodhounds found me thus, but how did you leave me? Beaten within an inch of my life! Tortured as only human demons can torture their helpless victims! Robbed of strength, of health, of reason, even!"

"Before your coming, I was rich in more than this world's goods. I had gold and acres and stock beyond counting, almost. I had more: I had a wife and child! I had—oh, you pitiless demons!"

His voice grew choked and husky, his

forced composure gave way under a terrible strain, and his nervously-working fingers threatened to once more close in a death-grip on that discolored throat; but again he conquered his impulse, and resumed his terrible arraignment:

"The devilish wrongs confined to my own person I might possibly forgive, but the rest—my wife! my child! My Rose—my Pearl! Tell me of them, ye black-hearted monster! Where are they, now? Whither did ye take them when— Tell me, I say, or—die like the wolf you are!"

Once more his hands flew out, to close upon Dupont's shoulders, and with fiercely-working features face almost touched face. Eyes glowed like balls of electric light. Teeth were bared and clicked together like those of a hungry wild beast who scents fresh blood.

"Don't kill—I'll tell all I know!" gasped the craven, hoarsely.

Those steel-like fingers instantly opened and their owner drew back a pace, both hands thrust behind his back the better to resist temptation.

"Speak, Oren Dupont! Tell the truth, the whole truth, and live; but if you try to trick me by a lie, you shall die the death of a dog! I swear it by the once happy past!"

"I'll tell you all I know, sir," began Dupont, plucking up a little courage to meet that emergency. "I only wish it was more, but—"

"My wife, my child, dog?"

He shook his head, shrinking back with an appealing gesture.

"I wasn't there, sir. I never saw woman or child; but—"

A swift gesture cut his slow, unsteady speech short, then the Mad Detective asked:

"Who is Captain Cowl, Oren Dupont?"

The fellow gave a quick start, flashing a frightened glance over his shoulder before making husky reply:

"Who is— I hardly understand what you mean, sir."

"You are lying now, Oren Dupont, and each falsehood sends you nearer the grave—nearer the maw of hungry wolf and gluttonous buzzard!" the Wild Rider warned, lifting a finger toward the slowly-circling buzzards, for now there was a round half-dozen hovering above the heads of captive and captor.

"I don't— Why should I— What must I say, then, sir?"

"Tell me all you know about this border raider who calls himself Captain Cowl, the White Hood Chief. Who is he? What is his rightful name? How many years have you been serving under his lead?"

Cold drops of perspiration stood out upon the pale face of the cornered wretch, and he trembled in every joint, his heavy lids partly closing, like one turning faint.

Still, he knew that an answer of some sort must be given this man, and making an effort to rally his powers, he muttered:

"What I don't know I can't tell, sir. Only— Shall I make my oath by high Heaven, sir?"

"Who is Captain Cowl, Oren Dupont?" pitilessly persisted the other.

"If he's more or other than just Captain Cowl, sir, I swear by all that's good and holy I can't tell you!" earnestly asseverated Dupont. "I never saw his face, for he always wears his mask while with his men, or whenever any of us are in his neighborhood. And as for his name—"

"Speak it, you dog!"

"I never heard him called anything but just the boss, or Captain Cowl, or the chief, sir," desperately answered Dupont. "If he has any other name, I can't swear to it—not to save my very life, sir!"

"It is to save your life, Oren Dupont! Give me the information I've sought for so many long years, and you may go free, to run your course until the noose of the common hangman shuts off your wind forever. Will you speak, then?"

The prisoner hesitated, shifting nervously on his feet, moistening his parched lips with a no less feverish tongue, looking like one powerfully tempted to speak: either truth, or lies coated with plausibility to serve the same purpose!

But, insane though this strange being might be, he was not so utterly devoid of wit as to unhesitatingly accept lies for truth, and no man alive knew better than Oren Du-

pont how surely even a single slip might make all the difference between life and death in his own case.

"What can I say more than I have, sir?" he finally ventured, huskily. "I'd gladly tell you what you want to know if I could, but—you won't take a lie, and I've already told you the truth as far as I know it."

For a brief space silence reigned, Crazy Jack gazing intently into that fear-lined visage like one trying to read what might be hidden below the surface; then, with a rapid motion he drew forth a card from his bosom, turning the face of a woman's photograph fairly before Dupont's eyes, slowly pronouncing the words:

"For the last time, you devil! Look! Did you ever see a face in life that resembled this sun-picture, Oren Dupont?"

"I can't—it's mighty hard to remember when you curb a critter up so terrible harsh, boss!"

"Think before you speak, I warn you," added Crazy Jack, with ominous composure, still holding forth that photograph, and moving yet a little nearer the prisoner to afford him a clearer view. "Now—try to remember aright, if you love your life, dog! Now—tell me this: is there any woman who owns a face at all like this now with Captain Cowl?"

The Mad Detective spoke with forced composure, but his blazing eyes warned Dupont how fiercely the blood-devil raged beneath that outward calm, and he feared to speak, his eyes once more lowering.

To fall again upon that weapon-bristling girdle, where a brace of long knives and a pair of heavy revolvers hung—fairly within reach of his nervous right hand!

For the space of a single breath he resisted that fierce temptation; but then, yielding, he snatched at a revolver, cocking it as he jerked it free, thrusting muzzle against Crazy Jack's breast as he pulled trigger!

CHAPTER III.

A BROKEN HEART AND SHATTERED MIND.

SWIFT as was this desperate action, those of the wild being whose life was attempted were none the less rapid, mind, hand and body all acting in perfect concert.

A writhing turn of his trunk, a sharp stroke with his nearest hand came just in time to save his life, for the cartridge promptly responded to the fall of the hammer, and the loss of even a single instant would have rendered all struggles futile.

As it was, the bullet scored his breast and the powder scorched his clothing, the shock of that heavily loaded cartridge causing Crazy Jack to stagger a bit, like one under the influence of strong drink, or a man upon whom the benumbing hand of grim death was closing, once for all.

Oren Dupont gave a vicious yell of triumph, for he had thrust that muzzle fairly against the breast of his insane foe, and he could not think that escape from instant death was possible.

"Now ye have got it!" he cried vindictively, thumb on hammer to fire a second shot. "Butcher me, will ye? Try to—Ha-a-a!"

For, in place of falling in death-throes, Crazy Jack rallied and surged forward, one claw-like hand catching the wrist of his armed hand and thrusting the smoking pistol up and backward, the other closing in a death-grip on his throat.

"Will you, treacherous cur?" shrilly cried the madman as they closed, breast to breast, each nerving himself for what could hardly prove other than a death-grapple.

Oren Dupont strove desperately to turn that black muzzle again upon his captor, at the same time trying to bear up against that fierce assault, the first shock of which had so nearly flung him upon his back.

For a few seconds the two men swayed from side to side, panting as they called every ounce of strength into play, each knowing only too well how surely defeat meant death.

Breast to breast, face to face, eyes filled with fire, swaying from side to side, now forward, then recoiling as far, but always tight-locked in a mutual grip which little short of death could break.

Then Crazy Jack flung one leg back of his adversary, and adding his whole weight to the power of his muscles, tripped Dupont

up, both men falling together with a terrible shock.

Even that did not end the fight, for Dupont wrestled fiercely, managing to in part slip from beneath his mad antagonist, then fighting on as they lay side by side.

A score of seconds thus, then another sudden change. Over and over the two men rolled, bringing up against the fragment of rock on which Waldene Rutherford had been sitting when his captive recovered consciousness.

The shock was a sharp one, and caused an explosion of the weapon which the desperate outlaw had snatched from the Mad Detective's belt.

A short, half-smothered cry of agony, then those bodies separated, one lying in the last throes of death while the other drew back to stare for a brief space upon the awful work wrought by that pistol.

The butt was still clasped by Oren Dupont's hand, and his finger was still within the trigger-guard, thus plainly proving that he had killed himself while striving to slay his antagonist!

His elbow driven against that rock, the revolver had been forced fairly against his face, the explosion doing awful work, yet merciful in that the luckless wretch could never have known what hurt him.

Like one dazed for the moment Crazy Jack stared at that awful spectacle, brushing a hand across his eyes at brief intervals, as though seeking to banish the unwelcome vision.

Then a gloomy croak came floating down from the blue above, and giving a start, the Avenger looked upward to recognize the sailing vultures.

That sight seemed to break the spell, and instinct resuming its wonted sway, he looked to his own hurts, opening his bloody garments and unflinchingly probing his wounds with finger-tip.

Both were bleeding freely, yet neither was much more than skin-deep, and that same instinct seemed to tell him that they would do their own healing if he only let them alone.

As he made a part-turn, the sunlight fell across his reddened hands and with a strange, shivering, shrinking, he stared at the still damp fingers, a low sound rising in his throat until it turned to muttered words.

"Red! Why does everything look so much like blood? Red—all red! I thought—where is he, then?"

Dashing hand across his eyes, Rutherford stared around him, dwelling briefly upon the two horses, then passing on until his gaze was caught by that prostrate shape with mutilated face turned up toward the blue heavens.

That muttering changed to a low, soothing hiss. That gaunt figure began to lower and to crouch. A stained finger moved toward those parting lips in the signal for silence.

"Sh h h!" passed softly over his parched lips as that warning finger lightly crossed them. "Quiet, ye fools! He sleeps—wake him not, I bid ye, for I must—Where is she, devil?"

Crouching still lower, the madman crept toward the still form, sinking upon his knees as he gained its side, those final words coming in a hiss of wakening passion.

His right hand went forth to touch that death-masked visage, then jerked back with startling quickness, its owner recoiling as sharply. His face turned livid and his eyes opened widely as he stared at the fresh blood which marked his hand.

"Red—all red! Dead—all dead! What does it mean? Can I never escape from this horrible curse? Will the day never come when—Ha! where am I, now?"

Crazy Jack sprung to his feet and stood with both hands tightly clasped over his aching eyes.

Red Ghost lifted his head from the bunch-grass which he was nibbling at just then, and after a brief space gave vent to a low whinny.

That familiar sound served its purpose right well, for Crazy Jack lowered his hands and gave his head a vigorous shake like one trying to cast aside an ugly dream.

He stooped to recover his fur cap, then moved a bit further to pick up the card-picture which he had thrust before those now unseeing eyes.

He could hardly have helped seeing that ghastly corpse, but he made no sign, passing it by to recover his Winchester rifle, after which he moved across to where Red Ghost was standing, muttering a few words in an undertone like one who spoke unwittingly.

He betrayed no signs of stiffness or of pain as he sprang lightly from earth to saddle, and only for those still fresh blood-stains no one could have credited all he had so recently undergone.

Red Ghost tossed his head restlessly, as though eager for word or signal, but neither came to him from the lips of his master. Crazy Jack sat silently on his back, once more lost in a waking dream.

After a brief period of hesitation, the steed turned to take the back track, walking slowly, easily, just as though it knew that master was hardly fit to take heed for himself.

The vultures croaked, the prowling wolf howled afresh, but the Mad Detective paid no heed to either sound. Not once did his head turn for a backward glance; not once did he seem to remember the corpse he was leaving behind him to the horrid mercies of those furred and feathered scavengers of the desert!

For several minutes this silent progress lasted; then the Wild Rider seemed to rouse himself in part, and a blood-marked hand stole into his bosom, to come forth again with that photograph clasped between his unsteady fingers.

His breath came in a sharp, painful gasp as his eyes steadied sufficiently to fix upon that sun imprint, and a moaning sound escaped his lips as he saw—what he had in happier days so fondly kissed—the bright, sweet smile which seemed to light up that truly beautiful face.

It was the portrait of a woman still young in years, yet old enough to have learned the deepest, purest love of woman's life: maternity. It showed in her more than fair face, here, even though the photograph had suffered from much handling, as well as exposure to the weather.

"So fair, and yet so false!" hoarsely muttered Waldene Rutherford, as he gazed through misty eyes at that pictured face. "Who would dare to even think—A lie, ye devils!"

He flung forth a tightly clinched hand and shook it in fierce defiance at those unseen enemies who dared to impugn the perfect truth and honor of this, his lost wife.

"Ye lie in your throats, ye curs! She never betrayed me so foully! She never wrote—But—what is this, then?"

His fierce tones broke and grew husky as he fumbled once more in that hidden pocket, to finally produce a soiled and much-worn sheet of note-paper.

Red Ghost tossed an impatient head, whimpering shortly as though protesting against this loss of time, but a quick jerk at the reins and a sharp command quieted the animal.

Turning more to the sunlight, brushing a hand across his dim eyes, the Mad Detective once more read those cruel words which had gone so far toward making him the wretched being he surely was.

There was neither date nor place at the head; merely the name which this man had borne with honor if not with distinction in those years now long gone by: Waldene Rutherford.

After this name came the words:

"This day the living lie ends. I never loved you, though I repeated those fond vows as often as you seemed to care for them. If I did not actually hate, I feared you—then. Now—I neither fear nor hate: I have room left only for—pity!"

"Do you ask me why, Waldene Rutherford?"

"Because I at last know what real love means! Because my heart has at last found its master! Because—But why say more?"

"When these lines meet your eyes I will be far away, far beyond your reach, lost to all save love—and my gallant lover!"

"Can you make this seem clear, Waldene Rutherford? Can you fully realize the truth: that I am no longer your loved slave, but am the loving slave of the only man this wide world holds for me!"

The man gave a groaning gasp as his eyes passed to the final sentence, and a touch of his heels sent Red Ghost onward once more.

He thrust both note and picture back into his bosom, then from the opposite breast he drew forth a second card, bending over it with a low moan of mingled grief and joy.

"My Pearl beyond price! My baby girl! Where art thou, now? Oh, why am I marked out for such awful sufferings? Have I been so guilty? Am I eternally cursed in the sight of high Heaven? If not—Oh, my angel babe! If I might only see—if I might only touch you—once!"

Hot tears still further dimmed those sunken eyes, and with heart-hungry fervor the maniac pressed his fever-parched lips to that sun-pictured face, so bright and smiling, so full of babyish joy and arch cunning.

Unheeded Red Ghost quickened his pace, trotting low and level as though fearful of disturbing his sorrowing master, keeping to the back trail with wonderful cleverness, yet stopping short with pricked ears and dilating nostrils as he gave a sharp snort of mingled anger and affright.

Roused from his musings by that start and sound, the Mad Detective thrust that precious keepsake into his secret pocket, right hand gripping rifle as he flashed a fiery look ahead, guided by those pointed ears; but breaking into a low, harsh chuckle as he saw what had caused Red Ghost to give that abrupt warning.

Three long and gaunt-bodied mountain wolves were gathered about a human body lying there upon the blood-sprinkled rocks, and though afraid to actually oppose that intrusion, they were sullenly growling and showing their white fangs as they reluctantly slunk away from that grim feast.

Crazy Jack burst into a maniacal laugh as he saw all this, for he now recognized both body and place: it was here his rifle had sounded the death-knell of one of the men he had sworn eternal vengeance against for wrongs almost without a parallel.

That sight banished all softer sentiments, and as that worshiped picture passed from hand to bosom, with its vanishment likewise passed away that human weakness he had been betraying.

"Fear not, brother devils!" he cried aloud to those skulking wolves. "Come to the red feast I've spread for thee, brethren! Riot and guzzle, ye imps of the gulches! And ye, winged demons of the air! Come—come to the crimson banquet, my darlings! Come and gorge! Come and fatten! Come and wrangle over this vile carcass until naught by tooth-and-beak-polished bones remain to mark another mile-stone in my never-ending march of vengeance."

Then, urging his steed onward, he cried shrilly once more:

"Come to the feast, all ye devils, for woe to them I seek!"

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN COWL AT HOME.

THE dense, thorny growth of chaparral came almost to the foot of that high, stony-sided, ragged-topped hill, yet there was space sufficient left clear by nature to afford foothold for such as had there been planted.

Close to the scrubby growth rose several spreading-topped trees, the lower branches of which had been cut away to give room for a rude-looking yet fairly-comfortable cabin of sticks and stones, over which had been trained several wild grape-vines, now in full leaf, although the clusters of fruit were still green and diminutive.

Here and there showed small fires, some still smoldering, others aglow, but the majority mere spots of whitened ash.

Lying at careless ease under the shade were a number of roughly-garbed men, the only thing at all uniform about them being in the belt of arms all wore, supporting knife and brace of navy-size revolvers.

Yet, careless as all seemed, this was only on the surface, as was made evident when a faint, distant whistle came floating through the air.

Every man sprung to his feet, grasping the ready Winchester which rested within easy reach, but no one uttering word or shout, merely turning eyes and rifle-muzzles toward that point from whence the signal had emanated.

A tall, richly-clad figure suddenly came into view from some as yet unknown resting-

place, one gloved-hand lifting in a silent signal, to these, his men.

Then, following that first whistle came another with different modulation, and the tall figure swung his head around to glance over those armed men, a clear, cold voice coming from behind the curious head-covering which he wore:

"A false alarm, lads. Go back to your rest, and don't strain either your eyes or your ears, I humbly beg of you!"

There was an echo of grim mockery in his last sentence, but none of those rough fellows saw fit to make reply in other than in actions; one and all turned away, leaving their masked leader there alone to meet him whose hoof strokes were now plainly audible.

That leader was of tall and athletic build, his every motion denoting both strength and activity beyond the common.

For the most part his garb was that customarily worn by wealthy rancheros from the Mexican side of the Rio Grande; *neglige* shirt of the finest merino, silken sash, short jacket which glittered with gold lace and rich embroidery, trowsers of pale-blue plush, the lower portion of which sunk from sight below the morocco-tops of shapely riding-boots, the last evidently of American manufacture.

But, stranger than all the rest was his head-covering: a monk-like hood which came low over his forehead and covered all trace of hair at the back where its lower edge seemed sewed fast to the collar of jacket or of shirt. And, in addition to this cowl, a veil of thin but substantial silk fell over his face and touched his swelling chest, held more perfectly in place by the heavy fringe of gold bullion with which the pendent portion was bordered.

Both cowl and veil were white as snow, without stain or trace of color other than that golden fringe.

Scarcely had the men fallen back out of ordinary ear-shot than a single horseman came into view around the turn, both man and beast bearing traces of long and rapid traveling.

"You, is it, Tom Ackerman?" sharply challenged the Masked Chief as he sighted this new-comer.

"What's left o' me, that is, Captain Cowl!" answered the man, lifting hand to his sweaty and dust-grimed face by way of salute.

"And alone? Where are your mates, then?"

"Gone to—down that-a-way, boss!" pointing his grim meaning more clearly by a gesture. "Devil's done ketched 'em both, I'm thinkin', sir!"

"What sort of devil, you ass?"

"Him—the wu'st I ever hear'n tell on, boss!"

"What!" sharply ejaculated Captain Cowl, right hand clinching tightly as it flew up in a fierce gesture. "Surely not—out with it, man! Where are your two pards, for the last time?"

"I see Frank Ridley go down with a mighty big red shingle lifted off o' his roof, boss!"

"By whom?"

"That devil, Crazy Jack—no less!"

Captain Cowl turned abruptly away, just as a man might who wished to hide from other eyes too eloquent features, seemingly forgetful of that impenetrable mask he constantly wore.

Tom Ackerman kept silence, improving the opportunity by slipping stiffly from saddle to earth, giving a stifled groan as he straightened his bowed back, like one suffering from rheumatism or lumbago.

Faint though that sound was, it reached the acute ears of Captain Cowl, who wheeled swiftly, one hand mechanically grasping a pistol-butt.

Ackerman recoiled involuntarily from that burning gaze and menacing gesture, and catching foot against a firmly imbedded stone his cramped limbs failed their master and he fell in a clumsy heap to earth.

"I didn't—I'll be all right in a minnit, boss!" the worn knave huskily stammered; but instead of showing anger, Captain Cowl gave a sharp whistle which brought half a dozen of his rough fellows in a run to the spot, and to them he spoke:

"Look to Ackerman, lads. Give him a bracer if he wants it; give him food as well

as drink if he needs so much. Then—Ackerman?"

"On deck, Captain Cowl!"

"Come to the Den, where I'll be waiting for you, please. Don't come until you've picked up enough to give in a clear report, but—well, I was never famed for my waiting propensities, Thomas!"

With a low, half-smothered chuckle Captain Cowl turned away, going back in the direction from whence he had suddenly appeared, turning a slight spur of that rocky height, then lifting a leafy curtain to enter a wide-mouthed cavern.

As the cunningly arranged vines fell like a veil behind him, the masked outlaw found himself in a dim light which seemed little short of utter darkness to one just coming from the clear sunlight without; but he knew every inch of that subterranean retreat, and as he pressed forward the light grew clearer and surrounding objects more distinctly visible.

A rude metal lamp with glass chimney hung in chains from the rocky roof at a point where the sides and top of that passage grew nearer together, marking the entrance to what was locally known as "The Den," and which was deemed sacred to Captain Cowl and such of his men as he saw fit to honor by a special invitation.

A rude table stood near the rear wall of this rock chamber, garnished with cards, glasses, bottle and cigar-box. Near the table stood a couple of stout chairs, into one of which Captain Cowl sunk, uttering a half-smothered oath as he poured forth a heavy dose of liquor, lifting his silken veil far enough to toss off the fiery draught.

Worn and weary though he surely was, Tom Ackerman did not dare keep his chief in waiting for long, knowing as he did what a heavy hand and hot temper that master was cursed with.

Drawing near the Den, he gave the regulation signal, to which Captain Cowl responded:

"Come!"

"Which I done it jest as quick as I could, boss," meekly assured the fellow, baring his head and standing before that half-reclining figure much as a cowed slave faces a stern master.

"All right; I'm not kicking, Thomas. Now—how about the two men you rode away from camp with, yesterday?"

"One of 'em's too mighty dead fer skin-nin', boss, an' I reckon all-two-bolt-on-'em is!"

"How did that come to pass, my pretty lad? Speak along the chalk-line, Thomas, or—well, you know me, I reckon!"

Ackerman told the truth so far as he knew it, trying to conceal nothing, just as though he had full faith his actions would find full justification in the naked facts.

"He killed Ridley at his first shot, then?"

"Jest lifted a hunk o' his skull bigger'n my hand, boss!"

"And you? What were you and Dupont doing, Thomas?"

"Runnin' off like so many bald-headed tom-turkeys, boss!" bluntly confessed the fellow, with a sickly grin. "At fu'st glimp' we knowed who was bouncin' us all; an' when it comes to buckin' ag'inst Crazy Jack—count me out, pardner!"

"How did you escape him, then?"

"Long o' his chasin' Oren Dupont, sir," with deeper gravity. "We come to a split in the trail, an' while he tuck on, I tuck t'other. An' so—wanl, I hain't never see'd no more o' Oren—nur I don't reckon I ever will, too!"

Captain Cowl made an impatient gesture, then spoke:

"All right, Ackerman. I may feel like asking you further questions later on, but for now you can go. Tell Lieutenant Morales that I am waiting for him here, please."

Ackerman shuffled away through the gloom like one only too glad to escape so easily, and Captain Cowl let his head droop until chin touched chest, seemingly dozing, or else lost in deep reveries.

Again his attention was called to the coming of a friend, and giving the permission without which none of his men would dare step inside that sacred retreat, a heavily-built yet light-footed man of middle age came into the light.

"You sent for me, Captain Cowl?" he spoke, in pure and unaccented English, although name, dress and features all proclaimed him of Mexican or of Spanish descent. "How can I serve you, sir?"

"First, by doffing that formal manner, Pedro," pleasantly said the chief, throwing back his cowl, but letting the silken veil remain in place. "It's the comrade I wish to talk with, not the officer, Morales."

"All right, captain, and to prove my willingness—see!" lightly uttered the other, drawing chair to table and helping himself to both cigars and liquor. "Comrades we are, then, until your mood alters."

Captain Cowl tersely summarized the report brought to camp by Tom Ackerman, then added:

"No man ever lived who had a better right to recognize Crazy Jack as the men call him; the Mad Detective, as outsiders have dubbed this murderous fellow; I say no man living had a better right to recognize that devil than Frank Ridley!"

"He was one of the party, then?" quietly asked Morales.

"Ay! He was one of the squad who carried out my orders to the very letter that black night!" almost savagely rejoined Captain Cowl.

"And Oren Dupont was another?" asked the lieutenant, covertly but keenly scanning his superior officer through the veil of blue smoke which curled upward from his lips just then.

Captain Cowl made no immediate reply, and Morales added, gravely:

"There's one thing dead-sure, sir, which is this: we've either got to throw that human devil off his trail of blood forever, or else send out recruiting officers!"

"You mean?"

"Just what you must have ciphered out for yourself, captain. Ackerman says he saw Ridley killed, and that he left Crazy Jack in hot pursuit of Dupont. If both are gone—and Oren would have returned before this, if alive and well—that makes seven good men we have lost from our muster-rolls!"

There was a pause during which neither man spoke; then Captain Cowl responded:

"Yes. Seven good and gallant lads. All within the past six months, and all by the same hand, unless signs lie."

"And that hand owned by the Mad Detective?"

"Yes. And more: each and every man of that murdered seven belonged to the squad who White-Capped Waldene Rutherford!"

Another pause, for, bold though he surely was, Pedro Morales felt by no means wholly certain of his ground, just then.

But presently he quietly spoke:

"It's a mortal pity they didn't kill him outright, then!"

Captain Cowl struck the table with a gloved fist so sharply that bottles and glasses rattled.

"Kill him? Kill Waldene Rutherford, is it?"

"Better his death than the death of so many of our best and most trustworthy men, surely, Captain Cowl?"

"Kill Waldene Rutherford?" repeated the chief, even more viciously. "If they had dared go one inch further than my orders showed—if by any mischance or carelessness they had killed him, I'd have murdered every mother's son of 'em!"

"Why so, captain? I thought you hated this fellow?"

"And you thought rightly, Morales. I hated Waldene Rutherford far too intensely to rest content with merely killing his body!"

CHAPTER V.

FROM MASTER TO MISTRESS.

As those words passed his lips, Captain Cowl sprang to his feet and strode to and fro, making savage gesticulations while pouring forth a flood of execrations upon this, his viciously hated enemy.

Pedro Morales made no attempt to interrupt that flood, hitching his chair a little closer to the rude table as though to give freer scope to those nervous strides; but there was a still deeper meaning in that natural action.

Watching his chance, and taking advan-

tage of the moment when Captain Cowl turned his back that way, the lieutenant reached over to where the glass was standing, and deftly shook a little white powder from the paper hidden in his curved palm.

In his sudden outburst of fury the Masked Chief had left his glass half full of brandy, and this almost instantly dissolved the powder, leaving nothing to betray the author of that swift trick when Captain Cowl again wheeled to face his next in command.

Lieutenant Morales was quietly seated, leaning lightly with an elbow on the table, hand supporting his head. If easy to the verge of carelessness, there was nothing disrespectful in his attitude, and the veiled outlaw took no offense.

That fierce outburst of evil passions passed away almost as suddenly as it had come, and with a short, forced laugh, Captain Cowl resumed his seat, leaning both elbows upon the table and gazing steadily at his officer through the eyelets in his silken veil.

A brief silence, then he half mockingly said:

"Admirably played, Don Pedro, but there's the devil of curiosity lurking in your keen black eyes, for all!"

"Is that a crime, captain?"

"Not always, Morales, but now—beware, my fine fellow! This is my private secret, and 'twill prove sudden death to all who think to share it against my will! I warn you, thus: take good heed, Senor Don Pedro, or still worse may come of it!"

Drawing back a bit as this harsh hint left his lips, Captain Cowl lifted glass from table, blowing that bullion-fringed veil away from his mouth far enough for the free passage of the liquor, then gulped down the fiery draught as though it had been nothing more powerful than so much water.

Pedro Morales gave no sign of doubt or of uneasiness, although it surely must have been a crucial moment, knowing as he did how swift this masked being was to wield knife or work revolver whenever his anger was fairly stirred.

With steady hand the lieutenant reached over for the bottle, pouring a light dose into his own glass, then holding the goblet up before his eyes to gaze at the light through the amber liquid while slowly and gravely speaking:

"Are you not wasting breath, Captain Cowl? Your secrets are worth nothing to me, however important they may seem to yourself, sir. I, Pedro Morales, have but one aim in life, now: to help bring about the eternal downfall of Porfirio Diaz, the vile usurper!"

At least there was naught of pretense in those closing words, and knowing that so well doubtless helped Captain Cowl to believe it all.

He gave a wry grimace, turning his head to spit sharply over a shoulder, clearing his throat repeatedly.

"Pah! the bare thought of that crazy dog leaves a bitter taste in my mouth! And so—President Diaz, is it, Pedro?"

"Ay, sir, if you care to honor him with the title; may Satan's imps spread his couch right speedily!"

"Amen to that pious wish, my dear boy!" laughingly cried the Masked Chief. "Then you really have no such burning curiosity as I fancied I beheld in your keen eyes, Morales?"

"No, captain; I was thinking then of our national disgrace, of our living curse, of Porfirio Diaz and—I say, Captain Cowl?" questioningly.

"I'm hearing you, Lieutenant Morales."

"Is it not time for me to do a little more definite hearing, senor? You surely cannot have forgotten our contract? I have faithfully carried out my share, so far, but—may I say? You swore to lend me aid and support in turn, captain, and while our noble Garza is—"

"Until he comes out of hiding, Morales, what more can we do?" bluntly interposed the other, with an impatient gesture. "Let him show us how and when and where to strike for liberty, and we'll do our full share, be sure! But until then—enough!"

Turning to the table again Captain Cowl poured out another portion of brandy, slowly circling it in the goblet while adding:

"I'm not so certain that I've told you all I had in mind when I summoned you, Lieutenant Morales, but, enough for now! Go you and see that Tom Ackerman keeps a still tongue in his head about this Crazy Jack affair, at least until I have fully decided what steps to take next."

Lieutenant Morales rose to his feet, stiffly saluting in soldierly fashion, standing at "attention" while his chief yawned long and audibly.

"Curse this heat! It makes me sleepy as a yellow curl!" pettishly growled the veiled leader. "Morales!"

"Ready, captain!"

"Go to the devil, will you?"

"When you send for me, yes, Captain Cowl!" coolly retorted the lieutenant, wheeling and leaving the Den without further ceremony.

Still, he was not so deeply offended but that there was a grim smile playing about his bearded lips as he looked back over a shoulder when fairly screened by the gloom.

He saw Captain Cowl lift and drain his glass, then sink sleepily back in his seat, head drooping languidly like one already yielding to an irresistible desire to sleep.

"May Satan hang double weights on each eyelid!" softly breathed the bold schemer as he moved onward more rapidly, soon emerging from the cavern into the clear light of day, pausing just without that leafy screen to flash a keen and comprehensive glance around.

Knowing as he did how sternly Captain Cowl was wont to rule his reckless vagabonds, Pedro Morales hardly expected to catch any of their number lurking near the entrance to that tabooed retreat; but from where he was now standing, not a living soul was visible.

"Good again!" he muttered, drawing a long, free breath, then moving forward, quickly passing around the little hill-spur, which gave him a fair view of that irregular encampment.

It did not take him very long to find out where Thomas Ackerman had retreated for rest after his eventful scouting trip, but the fellow was not so utterly worn out that his tongue failed him, for a number of rough knaves were gathered around, eagerly drinking in the details of that tragic scene as Lieutenant Morales came up.

"Steady, all!" came his stern warning, an instant later. "Break away, men! And you, Ackerman, use your wits more and your tongue less."

"I didn't—whar's the mighty harm o' tellin' jest what did come to happen so, boss?" half sulkily muttered the scout, making as though he would rise to his feet, but pausing again at a gesture from the officer.

"There may be no harm, yet there may be much, Ackerman. It is not for us to decide, but for the chief."

"He never said that I wasn't to tell, that I heered anyway!"

"But I heard him say pretty much the same thing, Ackerman. I've just come from his presence, and he bade me look you up, to drop a word of warning; listen, then!"

Word for word the lieutenant repeated the orders given him by Captain Cowl, adding no comments of his own.

The fellow listened doggedly, then gave a sully nod of comprehension, followed by the words:

"All right, boss. I'll button up tight, an' ef anybody—ef even the high-muck-a-muck him own self wants to larn more then I've told a ready, he'll hev to cut the stitches fu'st—so thar!"

With that explosion of disgust, the wearied scout turned himself over and pillowed his face upon his crossed arms, like one who, finding nothing better in this ungrateful world, resolves to leave it as entirely as one can through the medium of sleep.

With a smile of contempt, Pedro Morales turned from the spot, paying no further heed to Ackerman, his keen gaze roving from side to side, his sharp eyes drinking in each and every detail as he passed through the encampment.

His steps seemed aimless to those who noticed his movements, just then, yet underneath that seeming carelessness lay a purpose strong and earnest enough to run the risk of sudden death.

Still, impatient though he really was,

Pedro Morales did not actually approach the rude yet comfortable *jacal* of which mention has already been made, until he was fully assured that none of the band of White Caps were lurking inconveniently nigh.

This cabin, as well as the chief's Den, was taboo to the band, and in spite of the precautions he deemed best to take, Lieutenant Morales knew right well that he had little to fear from either spies or eavesdroppers.

When satisfied that he could win no more favorable opportunity, the Mexican stepped up to the closed door of the shaded hut, tapping softly upon the wooden barrier, his left hand rising to remove his slouch hat.

A brief pause, then the door swung open; but the passage was barred by the inmate who had responded to that summons.

"My lady!" murmured Morales, bowing humbly, yet with a vivid glow in his dark eyes which only too plainly betrayed his strong emotions.

"It is you, Lieutenant Morales?" asked a low, sweet voice, coming from behind a fine-meshed veil which covered the head and face of the woman who stood only partially revealed in that shadowed light.

"Your humble servant, my lady," answered the soldier, then touching finger to lip as he cast a swift glance around, like one who feels espial or unwelcome intrusion.

The woman caught her breath sharply at this, giving a start, then swiftly whispering.

"What? You surely mean—you have discovered something of importance, then, Morales?"

"Too much to think it the place of wisdom to shout it out here, my lady!" cunningly asserted the other, shrewdly making the most of his advantage.

The woman hesitated long enough to flash another swift look around the spot, then stepped back and aside, hurriedly speaking in low, far from steady tones:

"Enter, señor, if you please! I have not—oh, sir, you are not trying to deceive me? You really have learned something about—you can tell me of my darling child?"

Stepping across that humble threshold, Pedro Morales closed the door behind him, dropping his hat without heed as his hands flew out to clasp those which the agitated woman extended while making that broken, hardly intelligible appeal.

His head bowed until his hot lips touched those hands, pressing kiss after kiss upon their velvety skin, his ardor growing with each salute until, frightened or offended by that dangerous warmth, the woman shrunk back, fairly jerking her hands from his clasping fingers.

"How dare—don't, sir, I beg of you!" she stammered, forcing herself to change both manner and terms, though the effort was too plain for one so deeply in love as was Pedro Morales to mistake.

"Is it too much if I salute your hands, madam?" he asked, with forced composure, putting his hands behind his back like a child who is doing its level best to resist temptation. "Am I to be denied even so much, then?"

The woman shrunk still further away, partly averting her face, thus turning toward the little window through which sifted the light of day.

She was tall, of stately stature, with admirably proportioned figure, which was well displayed by the garments she wore.

These were of rich, even rare stuff, the fashionable cut of which formed a startling contrast with her humble surroundings.

Her arms were exposed by the short-cut sleeves, her bodice was cut low, her full bosom veiled by folds of filmy lace.

As stated, over head and face she wore a lace veil, but through its soft meshes he who now gazed so longingly upon her, could with fair accuracy trace her strong yet perfectly shaped features, all combining to make up a face almost regal in its beauty.

After a brief silence, during which his burning eyes were fully occupied, Pedro Morales spoke again:

"Is it a reception like this that I deserve, madam, after thrusting my head fairly within the jaws of the hungry tiger? After daring for your dear sake—"

"You mean—what is it you do mean, my friend?" demanded the woman turning again, her hands clasped tightly, her bosom heav-

ing, her intense emotion betraying itself in every line.

"That I've done that this day which means certain death to me if the human tiger ever dreams of my agency," gravely declared Morales.

"My child! My poor, lost darling!" pantingly cried the woman, her voice choked and her words barely articulate as she came yet a little nearer this man who was playing on her maternal feelings, the more surely to gain his coveted ends. "At last! You have made the discovery, then, sir? Oh, tell me! tell me that you have found my baby!"

Instead of promptly answering that pitiful cry, one way or the other, the lieutenant averted his face, letting his head droop as in dejection for the moment.

The poor, tortured woman caught her breath sharply at this, one hand pressing tightly over her painfully throbbing heart.

The ghost of a smile flitted over the visage of Pedro Morales as he took covert note of all this, and now, feeling as though he had repaid in full that sharp rebuff of a brief space gone by, he abruptly changed both manner and attitude, fully facing the woman as he spoke in cold, measured tones:

"Wait, my lady! It is not so easy to say it all. And so—first, the chief, who is—"

"May the fire of heaven blast his baleful life!" fiercely cried the woman, her clinched right hand going upward, her other gripping the hilt of a dagger the blade of which was hidden in her bosom.

"Hist!" sharply breathed Morales, placing a finger-tip on her red lips at the same time. "Be cautious, my lady! If Captain Cowl should chance to hear such words—you know what a devil he can prove himself on occasion, surely!"

"Bah!" she cried, as that keen weapon flashed forth from its place of concealment. "You—a coward, Pedro Morales?"

CHAPTER VI.

A GLANCE BEHIND THE VAIL.

THE Mexican flinched, but it was from her scornful speech rather than from fear of the weapon whose polished blade she brandished just then; and when he made reply, his face was ashen pale.

"If those words had been flung at me by lips of a man—look!"

With a single stride the Mexican was close to the woman, one hand lightly circling her throbbing throat, the other clasping knife-hilt, the long blade, brightly polished and keenly pointed, quivering as though about to flash downward in quest of an enemy's heart!

One instant thus; then he stepped back, smiling grimly at her shrinking away, speaking in softened tones:

"But you uttered them, my lady; you, my sun by day, my moon by night, my love through all the long hours! You called me craven? And, coward I am, but not for my own poor self; no, no, my lady! I am craven only when I have cause to fear for you, my more than life!"

Swiftly though these words came, they covered time enough for the woman to partly rally from her surprise, and now she spoke in apologetic tones, holding forth her disarmed hand in further token.

"I was wrong, very wrong, Señor Morales. I said far too much, but—am I all to blame, then? Can you not make some allowance for a widowed wife, a childless mother? Can you not—oh, my husband! my babe! How much longer must this terrible torture endure?"

She sunk back into a chair, bowing head and burying face in hands that trembled violently. Hot tears trickled through her slender fingers and dropped unheeded upon her rich dress.

The lieutenant frowned blackly at first, for one title mentioned by this grieving woman had stung him to the quick, her husband!

But, with all his faults (and they were legion), Pedro Morales was but an ordinary mortal, after all, and the man in him was softened by that briny rain, though he kept silence until the woman, with an evident effort, forced herself to outward composure once more.

Cutting short her murmured apology, Morales gravely spoke out:

"About your missing child, my lady: I wish I could say differently, but I have made no such discovery as yet, though I hope to be more successful ere many more hours roll over our heads."

"Oh, my friend! Do you really think that? Are you not—it is not merely a loving lie to calm my passionate grief, then, sir?"

"It is sober truth, my lady," declared Morales, once more taking possession of her hands, holding them firmly in spite of her instinctive shrinking away at his hot touch. "And when I succeed, as I surely shall, what will be my reward?"

"Anything—everything!" impulsively cried the mother, though she might have read the meaning held by those vividly glowing eyes. "Fetch back my baby girl, and—name your own reward, Pedro Morales!"

"Even if I demand in return—your love?"

Slowly yet intensely came those words, and his grip tightened upon the hands he clasped, as though he expected another violent withdrawal; but none such came, the woman standing almost rigidly erect, gazing upon his flushed face through her silken veil with eyes which seemed fully as full of fire as were his own dark orbs.

This silence lasted for the greater portion of a minute—an age under such circumstances; then a low, bitter, almost mocking laugh parted her full red lips.

"My love, do you say, Señor Don Pedro Morales? Bah! my love is dead and buried, ages since! Better for you—wiser far would you show yourself if you sought to wed with a clammy corpse than with me!"

But the Mexican shook his head, doggedly, his face showing paler by far than usual, but his jaws set in bulldog-fashion as he muttered in harsh, almost sullen accents:

"It's that or nothing, my lady! I'm taking my life in my hands when I move against Captain Cowl, as no one knows better than yourself. I am ready to risk all that. I am more than willing to serve you in this, as in all things else. But, surely, the slave is worthy his hire?"

"Are you in sober earnest, then, Señor Morales?"

"Do I look as though I were idly jesting, madam?"

The lieutenant smiled grimly as he spoke, and the woman bowed her head for a brief space. Then she lifted her eyes to his face, speaking quickly:

"Very well, sir. Only find my child for me, first!"

"I will find your child, my lady; I swear to do that, by all the saints on the calendar!" declared Morales, again covering her hands with ardent kisses.

Then, crushing his passions under as only a strong man could, he added in more natural tones:

"I have been ready to exchange pledge for pledge these many long weeks, my lady, but 'twas not solely to secure that promise I ventured to intrude upon you now. Have you forgotten a wish I once heard you let fall—a wish that you might tear away the mask our master so religiously wears, both night and day?"

"So that I might see what devil lurks behind that hideous cowl? No, I have not forgotten, but surely, that can never come to pass, sir?"

Morales laughed softly, his face lighting up with a smile so merry that it made him fairly handsome for the moment.

"There is nothing impossible for a true lover, my lady! The wish you let fall so carelessly, was caught up by me and sacredly registered on my inmost heart. And ever since I have been watching for such an opportunity as I can offer you now!"

"You mean—tell me more, Pedro Morales!" demanded the woman, grasping his arm as she leaned eagerly forward. "If you can gain me this view, I'll be your debtor for life!"

"Not so long as that, my lady, but only until the balance changes sides: only until you pay all scores and yet leave me hopelessly in your debt!"

The woman made an impatient gesture. She was in no mood for listening to such

love-sick whispers, and for a wonder Pedro Morales was strong enough to master his own wishes in favor of hers.

"The captain summoned me to attend him in the Den, my lady," he added by way of explanation. "He was drinking, and I joined him, of course. Then, when his face was turned away, I dropped a powerful drug into his brandy, and even before I could take my leave, his head was beginning to droop under the weight of slumber!"

"Then I can—it is possible, you think?"

"If you care to run the risk, my lady."

The woman laughed scornfully at this. She flung out a hand to still further express her contempt, then said:

"What am I to care for danger? Is life so well worth living that I need shrink from the possible frown of a demon in human guise, like this being you so meekly term master? Bah! only for the lingering hope that even yet I may tear the truth from his black heart, I would kill him as one slays a mad-dog!"

"When you will, that death-blow shall fall, my lady; here is the good right hand to to wield the weapon," earnestly avowed Morales. "I call him master, 'tis true, just as I would call any superior officer my master in a like sense. But, were Captain Cowl my twin brother instead of a masked stranger, I'd send this blade through his hot heart at your slightest wish—just so!"

With nervous force he brought the trusty blade down upon the rude table, the strong blade sinking nearly half its length into the tough wood.

The woman stood in silence while this was doing, saying naught until after the soldier had released his weapon and returned it to the scabbard at his hip.

Then she spoke:

"And you say my opportunity has come at last, my good friend?"

"I do, my lady. You will find Captain Cowl fast locked in a slumber which even your voice, your touch—even though that touch were to take the form of a kiss—"

"'Twould be fatal to that fiend as the kiss of asp was to Cleopatra!" almost fiercely cried the woman, with a gesture of intense hatred. "But this masked monstrosity: where will I find him, then?"

"Fast asleep in his Den, my lady. And if you— Be wary, I beg!"

There was need of this warning, surely, for, with a low, fierce cry, the woman caught up a light blanket from her cot, flinging it over head and shoulders as a guard against unwelcome inspection, then sprung to the door and flung it open, crossing the threshold the next instant.

But Pedro Morales followed quickly, speaking as he walked in tones too low for any other ears to catch:

"If you care naught for yourself, my lady, think of the child you have been mourning for so long! For her dear sake, take heed! If that man-devil should waken in time to recognize you as one who had lifted the veil he so religiously wears, what would be your fate?"

If she heard, she gave no sign, walking swiftly along the edge of the rocky hill, keeping to the denser shadows, although there had never been any restriction placed upon her movements since that camp had first been pitched.

Uneasy though he plainly was, Morales dared not invite closer attention from the members of the band who might even then be watching their movements, so he cut across by the shortest route, intercepting the woman with whom he was so madly in love as she came to the leafy curtain which masked the entrance to the Den.

"I will keep watch for you here, my lady," he hurriedly whispered, checking her progress for the moment by catching a fold of her blanket. "None of the men will dare enter without being called, but the master—the chief may waken, and—I pray you, love, take heed!"

"I will be cautious, I will take all heed," assured the woman, in turn as she freed the blanket from his grasp and stooped to pass under the screen he reluctantly lifted for her.

He knew that she spoke without thought, without feeling what she promised, so intense was her eagerness to gain a glimpse of the face which lay behind that white cowl and silken veil.

Freed from his annoying importunities at last, the woman passed quickly along that gloomy passage, thinking not of the peril she was thus incurring, intent only on solving the cruel doubts which had for so many weary, hopeless years haunted her whenever she came into actual contact with this lawless being known only to the world as Captain Cowl, the reckless leader of a force which had already gained an unenviable notoriety along the Southwestern border as "White Caps."

Like one who had before this trodden those gloomy ways, the woman pressed on until at the entrance of the Den itself, where she paused for a brief space, hand on heart in a vain effort to subdue its tumultuous throbbings, eyes fixed upon the figure of the White Hood Chief.

Captain Cowl sat beside the table, much as when Pedro Morales had left him, and now seemed to be soundly sleeping.

One arm hung carelessly over the back of his chair, its mate was supported by the table, that hand forming a cushion for his drooping head.

The famous white hood hung at his back by its fastenings, giving the eager-eyed woman a view of a suit of curling, jet-black hair; but the silk veil with its border of bullion still covered that countenance, only affording a tantalizing glimpse of one shapeless ear.

For the full space of a minute the woman remained under the lamp-light, her own form looking weirdly unnatural as she held the blanket in folds close to her throat, the silken veil masking her face though unable to wholly dim the fiery brilliancy of her great eyes as they gazed upon the drugged outlaw.

Then, like one drawn on by some mysterious force against which she had no power to struggle, the woman moved closer and closer to that motionless shape, only pausing when she was fairly within arm's-length of the being whom she hated even more than she feared.

Slowly her right hand moved, reaching out as though to lift that sacred veil, yet hesitating even when only another inch needed to be covered to gain her burning desires.

Quietly breathed the sleeping man, only the respiratory muscles moving, all else remaining still as though grim death had claimed a fresh victim. And then—

A heavy sigh broke from his veiled lips, and a few muttered words found vent; nothing connected enough to print, yet still enough to dissipate that brief irresolution, it seemed; for the next instant the woman lifted the silk veil until the light of the lamp fell athwart the face which had for so many years remained an enigma to her.

A handsome face it was, too, and hardly one to cause that wild cry of horror and affright which burst involuntarily from the lips of the veiled woman as she recoiled from that unexpected vision.

Captain Cowl gave a start at that wild scream, and at the same instant the light went out before a stroke which shattered the chimney, then strong hands closed upon the form of the recoiling woman.

CHAPTER VI.

CRAZY JACK, THE MAD DETECTIVE.

IN one of the few fairly well-timbered valleys of that particular section of Texas, a couple of travelers had pitched their camp for noon, and now one of them was lustily thumping away at the bottom of a tin plate with knife-baft, at the same time calling aloud:

"Rouse ye, lazy sybarite! Come to grub! Dinner for two, with—"

"That leaves you out, then, gentle cook, for I've appetite for a round dozen, and—only for two, you say?"

"One of whom I am decidedly which, and you can have the leavings, my noble knight of sock and buskin, unless you get a healthy hustle on."

"After me is good manners, Leo Crawford, and so—make room for your uncle, sonny!"

Overflowing with animal spirits the comrades fell to work upon the food prepared by the younger man, both proving themselves ready for the meal, yet not so busy

with eating that they had no room for chatting, bandying jests with nimble tongue and ready wit.

Two horses and a pack-mule were grazing hard by, where the grass grew greener and more luxuriant near the margin of the little stream.

Leaning against one of the trees, close at hand, stood a couple of Winchester rifles, while at their belts the comrades wore the regulation knife and brace of revolvers.

Yet it required no more than a single glance to decide that neither Leo Crawford nor Richard Ready were natives of that region, for upon each face and figure could be seen the characteristic brand of the city.

Yet these men who seemed so widely off their customary range, likewise seemed amply able to play their part as plainsmen, for with a single accord they reached out for the Winchesters, dropping plate and food at the same time, stern frown taking the place of sunny smiles.

The rapid thump-thumping of hoof-strokes on the sun-hardened soil caused this swift action, and even before the comrades could spring to their feet, rifle in hand, all doubt was banished; the as yet invisible horseman was surely headed straight for their encampment.

"Steady, boy!" sharply uttered Crawford, springing to the right as he motioned his friend to go to the left. "Catch the drop, but hold it until you have to let blizzer. Then— Look!"

That mad rider came abruptly into view, his foam-flecked steed at full gallop although the reins hung loosely on neck and neither hand nor heel was urging that flight further.

Swaying in the saddle, arms swinging limply, head drooping and back bowed, the horseman seemed more like one dying of wounds or exhausted by great and prolonged fatigue, than an enemy bent on slaughter.

The horse kept on, heading direct for that little camp-fire, giving a low, broken whinny as it came.

That sound seemed to revive its rider, for his head lifted, his arms flew up in a wild gesture, and in hoarse, barely articulate tones he cried aloud:

"Kill—kill—kill!"

Leo Crawford let his Winchester fall like one who knows its aid will not be needed, and with a cry he sprung forward, just as the sweat-dripping bay horse stopped by the camp-fire.

"Stop him, Dick! Don't let— Steady, old boy!"

The Wild Rider seemed to have exhausted his remnant of strength by that last cry, for he suddenly collapsed and fell forward on the neck of Red Ghost, only saved from an awkward fall to earth by the swift grasp and lucky support lent him by Leo Crawford.

Dick Ready was hardly less prompt to act, and between them the two young men carried the limp and seemingly lifeless stranger over to a grassy couch at the foot of a bushy-topped tree.

"You know him, poor devil?" softly asked Ready, when that burden was fairly out of their arms.

"I've seen him before, yes," answered Crawford, frowning a bit as he took note of the more recent bloodstains which marked the poor fellow's clothing. "Crazy Jack they call him, but—ugly work, Dick!"

"Ugh! Looks like he had been used as a slaughter-house mop! And yet— He isn't dead, Leo?"

That was more of an assertion than a question, despite its rising inflection, for just then the wanderer gave a gasping breath, one hand making a movement as though to free his throat of some clog.

Crawford sprung to where a tin cup of river-water was standing, but Dick Ready intercepted him with a pocket-flask, muttering:

"Do you want to murder him, man, dear? When in Texas do as— Now!" pouring an equal quantity of brandy into what he left of the water, then resigning cup to its owner. "Dope him with that, Lee, and if he isn't a croaker already, 'twill fetch— Lord! he sucks like a fish!"

There was fair foundation for this ejaculation, too! Crazy Jack gripped the edge of the cup between his teeth and never let go until the last drop was drained, then lifted

himself to a sitting posture by an evident effort of will rather than of strength of body, staring dazedly around with eyes that seemed to see objects only as one sees them in a nightmare dream.

"Red—all red! Blood—all blood! Why is it so?—my poor brain! Fire and bells! Don't make such a— So-ho, good boy!"

For Red Ghost, hearing the voice of his master, came gently forward and bent a damp muzzle to touch that unsteady hand as it rose to ward away those ugly phantoms. Touch and whimper served to at least temporarily banish those grim visions, and all at once the afflicted being seemed to recover his senses, forcing a wan smile as his eyes passed from one face to the other.

"I thank you, gentlemen—don't let me disturb— I fear I have been annoying you?"

"Don't you think it, my dear fellow," briskly cried Crawford. "We're only sorry you didn't put in an appearance just a few minutes earlier, so we could all start fair; yet there's a little grub left, and if you will only join us now— Eh?"

That gaunt hand passed slowly over his eyes, but without driving away the wistful expression which had entered them to cool that mad fire and moderate that wild fury which only an unsettled brain could feed.

"You do not seem like— You are really men, not devils, then?" he mumbled in husky tones.

"Never a horn, cloven hoof or forked tail among us, sir!" briskly assured Dick Ready, spinning around on a heel as though to afford a more comprehensive view, then facing the stranger to bluntly add: "And you?"

The stranger shrunk from that keen gaze, covering his face with his hands, which trembled as they screened; but only for a brief space.

He rose to his feet, supporting himself against the mossy trunk of the tree beneath which he had been placed by the two men, plainly still weak and far from being his wonted self. Yet, when he spoke his voice was clear, if gloomy, and gained strength as he spoke on:

"Who am I, you ask? Sometimes men call me Crazy Jack, at others, the Mad Detective, and yet others, the Bloodsucker! What am I? How can I put it all into words, though?"

"Why make the effort then, sir?" gravely cut in Leo Crawford, whose warning frown had been unseen or else ignored by his friend. "It is enough that you came to us in sore distress; now let us—"

With an impatient movement the strange being shook off that soothing touch, not even giving the last speaker a passing glance, but moving a little way from the tree-trunk as though his rallying powers no longer felt the need of such support.

"Who am I, do you ask?" he repeated, gazing steadily into the face of the actor, something of that dread light coming back to his hollow, blood-shot eyes. "One possessed by an uneasy devil, doomed to wander through endless night until I can find what is forever lost!"

"Hard luck that, for a fact!"

"Marked by the curse of a living death! Branded with—ah! if you could only see and read the red hot brands I carry on my back, sir! Brands that never grow cool! Brands that are burning, blazing, searing my poor brain by night as by day, until I sometimes think—why can I not think, sir, when I try so long and so hardly? If I could—if you only might— Have you seen her, dear man?"

His right hand flew out to fasten with a pain giving grip on Dick Ready's arm, and the wild fire seemed to soften into a yearning glow as his great eyes gazed wistfully into that smooth-shaven face.

"Tis not the ugly phiz of a devil, but the honest face of a man!" Crazy Jack added, scanning that countenance like one who finds in it a gleam of hope oncemore. "You will not lie to me, kind sir? Surely you will not join in that Satanic chorus which— No! I'll not yield to the call! I'll join in no devil-dance while I can—while this good man is trying to—you will help banish this swarm of buzzing bees, won't you, sir?"

"Mad as a hatter, for a fact!" muttered the actor, in a stage whisper back of a curved

palm. "What shall I—give me a cue, confound you, Crawford!"

"No, no! To me—talk only to me!" almost fiercely cried the Mad Detective, tightening his grip and swinging the actor around until his back was turned squarely upon his perplexed comrade.

"That's all right, my dear sir, and I'll do my level best to talk an ear off, if nothing less will satisfy you. Only—that's my arm you're caressing so ardently, don't you know?"

Crazy Jack frowned darkly at this flippant speech, but his fierce grip relaxed, and then he spoke again, his tones almost coaxing in their trembling earnestness.

"Tis a good face, an honest face, I say! And so—you will not turn me to cruel sport, sir? You will tell me—my lost one—you have seen my Pearl, sir?"

"Your pearl?" echoed the puzzled actor.

"We named her thus because she was so pure, so precious, so dainty, so altogether beyond price, you comprehend?" huskily explained the maniac. "Our Pearl—our angel babe! And now—you can tell me where to look for her, dear sir? You surely will not keep her hidden for that—I'd tear your false heart out with my naked hands if I even dreamed it of you!"

"Great conniption fits!" ejaculated Ready, springing back from the madman, his hands going up to guard his face through pure instinct. "I never heard of such a pearl before, and I don't care if I never hear of such another again!"

Leo Crawford quickly stepped in between the twain, giving Ready a warning shove as he passed, then speaking in calm, soothing tones to the strange being who had so unceremoniously cut their noonday meal short.

"If either of us could help you find what you have lost, sir, rest assured we would not require to be asked the second time. No, we can tell you nothing about your lost child, but—is there nothing else we can do for you, sir?"

The madman staggered briefly, his head drooping on his breast, but then he rallied to dash a hand roughly across his eyes, then giving his head a vigorous shake which caused his tangled locks to flutter, he broke out into a wild, reckless laugh.

"Just think of it, ye bloody devils! He calls me sir, while fools dub me Crazy Jack, and idiots call me the Mad Detective! Mad? Ye lie in your vile throats when ye pronounce the word and apply the damning brand! I am not mad! I am—who am I, though?"

Both hands arose to join and clasp his throbbing temples tightly, while that haunted look deepened in his blazing eyes and still more deeply lined his gaunt visage.

"Am I mad? Am I really crazed? Pab, ye inquisitive fools! Why seek that information from my sealed lips?"

"Go ask the howling wolves! Go ask the croaking buzzards, the hungry vultures! Go ask the mocking, jeering devils who bathed me in liquid fire from top to toe! Who flogged me with whips of fire! Who lashed me with nettles of lightning!"

"Am I mad, then? Hal hal hal! Ask the howling hell-hounds who ripped open my bosom with red-hot blades—who tore out my throbbing heart and filled its place with stinging scorpions, with creeping centipedes, with venomous tarantulas, with— Go ask them if I am mad!"

Flinging out a hand which Leo Crawford dodged as he might avoid a meditated blow, Crazy Jack strode over to where Red Ghost was grazing, taking the Winchester rifle from where it hung in slings, making sure the weapon was again in fair working order, then vaulting lightly into the saddle from which he had so recently fallen, more dead than living as it had seemed.

"Surely, sir, you will not be so rash as to ride out under this hot sun again so soon?" Crawford expostulated; but Crazy Jack paid no attention to his words, sharply speaking:

"You are wasting precious time, gentlemen. Delay not—linger no longer here, but hasten to where your friends await your coming. Devils go prowling in the night, these days, and grim death may mistake you for them! Come! I go before to bid your friends prepare for visitors!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO IS THE MAD DETECTIVE?

At touch of rein on neck and heel against flank, Red Ghost wheeled on a pivot and bounded away, breaking at once into a long-reaching gallop which was easy to the rider as a walk, yet which covered ground with remarkable rapidity, considering the jaded appearance which the bay stallion had worn on first entering that camp.

Leo Crawford stood gazing after the receding figure with a troubled frown wrinkling his forehead, moving not so long as that view lasted, but drawing a long breath when horse and rider vanished from sight around a miniature moor.

"Well, if I didn't think it, I wouldn't say so!" just then exploded Dick Ready, from a little to the rear of his companion.

"Eh? You said—what is it, Dick?" half-bewilderedly asked the younger man as he turned in that direction, brushing a hand swiftly over his eyes like one who seeks to banish unwelcome thoughts.

The actor gave a little snort, then turned to where their dinner had been so hastily abandoned, seating himself and pouring out a cup of strong coffee before he glanced up to say:

"Well, pardner, do you raise many such specimens out in this wooden country?"

"It seems more like tragedy than farce to me, Dick," soberly said Crawford, taking a seat opposite his friend, then falling to work with a still keen appetite.

Whether or no this gravely uttered sentence was so intended, it acted as a damper, and there was little further talk between the friends while they finished their meal.

After that, the two pair of hands made quick work of repacking the few utensils and such food as survived their vigorous assaults, after which the animals were caught up and prepared for the road once more.

"I've heard say that it's a wise doctor who refuses to swallow his own medicine, Lee," drily quoth Dick Ready as he climbed into the saddle with a reluctant glance toward the truly grateful shade they were about to abandon. "Is it on that same principle that you're so eager to dare the hot sun you so earnestly warned our elegant visitor against, then?"

"You heard his parting words, Dick?"

"About paving the way for our advent?"

"About grim death lurking under cover of night. Now I don't advertise myself as more of a coward than the general run of mankind, but, all the same, I'll take sunshine to darkness in mine, thank you!"

"Talking about grim death, I surely reckoned we had a sample of just that, when the fellow pitched out of his saddle!" more seriously said Ready as they left the noon-camp and struck out up the valley at a lively pace.

"Twas one of his sinking fits, I reckon. They say he is subject to such."

"And who may 'they' be, gentle pilgrim through this vale of—is it too much to say Tophet?" meekly supplemented the actor, drawing 'kerchief to mop his sweat-bedewed countenance just then. "Who is this fellow, anyway? What turned his brain? Surely not love-madness?"

Ready gave a low, half malicious chuckle as the final words passed his lips, and a little deeper flush came to the manly cheeks of his comrade; but Crawford let that quip pass by for the moment, simply saying:

"You are asking me for more than I can give, Dick. When I was here last spring, I met this strange being once, for an instant in passing, and was so powerfully impressed by his appearance that I put many questions concerning him to those who I fancied might enlighten my ignorance."

"See Webster's Unabridged for definitions!" muttered Ready in a stage whisper, lifting both hands with exaggerated awe lengthening his long, quaint features.

Crawford smiled faintly, but he was too well used to these erratic outbreaks to pay further notice.

"I could gather little information, though. People called him the Mad Detective, or Crazy Jack, but that was about the limit; he had only recently come to that section from further up country, and no one seemed able to place him more accurately."

"Well, he's a crazy-jack, plain enough!"

"And made so by cruel usage, no doubt."

A victim of some bloody border raid, I imagine."

"Not just such a raid as we are planning, though, I fancy! Eh, Leo?"

Crawford laughed as he shook his head, but through all there showed a touch of serious gravity, and it was easy to be seen that he felt far less at ease as to the ultimate outcome of this hinted-at raid than did his more mercurial comrade.

Still, that sly thrust changed the topic of conversation, and letting the Mad Detective drop, they began talking of more agreeable matters.

"It's all over but putting on the ring and saluting the fair bride, my boy!" gayly declared the actor, flinging up his hat and deftly catching it on a dusty toe as it came spinning downward again.

"I wish I could think just that, Dick!"

"Why don't you, then?"

"Because I know better," soberly replied Crawford. "I've told you pretty much how matters stand at the Lazy B Ranch, and—"

"Steady, me boy! Why should this particular bee be more lazy than any other honey-gatherer, pray? Explain, me lud!"

"I mean this: the brand chosen by Colonel Lawrence Beaumont is an iron letter, his last initial. But as there is another letter B registered ahead of his, he turned his brand so that the bar ran horizontally, making the brand when applied resemble a letter B lying down."

"And that's it, eh? Well, Lazy B goes. Now, you were saying?"

"That while you have heard pretty much how every-day matters go at the Beaumont Ranch, you can't know as well as I, just what fresh complications may arise at any hour."

"For instance, me lud?"

"Well, take young Beaumont."

"The elegant young squirt! Oh, I've seen him, ye know! At Santone. Hanging around the door of the greenroom. Trying to mash the— Pah!"

Dick Ready spat to one side with vicious energy, shaking his head as though that memory left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Leo Crawford frowned presently saying:

"You'd ought to be able to guess the rest, then, Dick. Blanche—God bless her pure soul!—loves me, and me alone, as I've told you long ago; but the rest of the family—not any!"

"And you really reckon young Beaumont will make trouble for us?"

"If he sees even the ghost of a chance he will, that's plain. And—did he see you often at San Antonio, Dick?"

"What was to hinder, pray, when he haunted the theater like a—like a blessed barnacle! And if Little Dolly hadn't been such a confounded flirt—well, 'twas all I could do to keep from making his heels break his fool neck—for a fact, sir!"

"Then we'll have to alter all our plans!" gloomily declared Crawford his brows gathering darkly, his head lowering in moody regret. "He isn't so mighty far from being an idiot, but he'd recognize you at first glance!"

"I'm open to lay big dollars against little cents he wouldn't, though!" briskly declared Ready, laughing lightly. "And I'll leave you to referee, Crawford, me boy! Now—don't bother me! Let me think—let me ponder—ahem!"

For nearly another hour the two friends rode briskly along, very few words passing between them. Dick Ready seemed staring at vacancy, a dull glaze covering his usually brilliantly-dancing orbs, and Leo Crawford thought it best not to disturb his meditations, knowing full well that they could only be for his own benefit.

After a few more miles of space had been covered, Crawford caught sight of a tiny dust-cloud on the sky-line, and his sharp ejaculation served to arouse the actor from his trance like state.

"What is it, me lud? What dost thou—eh? A suspicious sign? Is it wiser that we hunt a hole, most noble grand?"

"Hardly that," laughingly answered Crawford, yet thinking it no harm to look to his weapons, making sure both Winchester and pistols were in smooth-working condition.

In all of this he was copied by Ready, but their precautions proved to be pains wasted, for as that dust cloud resolved itself into the figure of horse and rider, Leo Crawford gave

a glad shout and spurred forward to the more quickly greet a friend.

"It's my old friend, Oliver Perkins," was his hurried explanation to Dick, then he sent ahead a cheery shout which quickly came back in like friendly greeting.

"Just reckoned I'd as well ride out to meet you, gentlemen," said the rancher, after their first greeting was over. "I calculated on meeting you up a bit sooner, though."

"How so, Perkins? I hadn't time to send you word, knowing—"

"Oh, Crazy Jack dropped down on us and said you were coming."

"Crazy Jack?" echoed Crawford. "Told you we were— But how did he know we were heading for your ranch, Oliver?"

"Ask me an easy one, pardner!" retorted the ranch-owner, shrugging his masculine shoulders as they pressed on toward the now not very distant buildings. "Crazy Jack may not be the devil some people call him, but I'm taking him for mighty close kin to that same party, now!"

"You saw him, then? Where is he now?"

"In a bunk, at the ranch, sleeping like a worn-out baby! Just dropped down there after saying you were coming, let go all holds and fell so sound asleep that old Gabriel might bu'st his lungs without even fazing the critter—solid truth, pardner!"

Tongues ran on briskly enough during the remainder of that ride, although Leo Crawford was not yet quite ready to explain his whole object in taking that trip, thoroughly as he trusted this rough-clad but honest friend and well-wisher.

When the Perkins Ranch was finally reached, the animals were turned over to a Mexican cowboy, and then, with a significant nod to the new-comers, Perkins led the way to one of the buildings, with all of which Leo Crawford had grown familiar in past days.

Stepping inside the open door, Perkins moved to one side to permit the others to enter then spoke in lowered tones as he motioned a hand toward a low bunk built against the rear wall of that room.

"Take a look for your own selves, pardners, and you needn't hold your breath through fear of disturbing the poor critter, neither!"

As their eyes grew better accustomed to that dim light, the friends saw Crazy Jack lying in the bunk, peacefully sleeping, hands clasped above his heart, fingers holding two photographs: one of his lost wife, the other of his baby girl!

Upon his worn, emaciated face rested a peaceful smile, though twin tears dampened his long eyelashes.

Leo Crawford gazed upon this picture for a full minute, then gave a little shudder as he took note of those blood-stained fingers. He turned away, the three men passing through the doorway, Perkins gently drawing it to after them.

"Mebbe he'll lay like that for days," he said, gravely. "He sometimes does, after one of his wild spells. And you—what if his hands are bloody? Who's most to blame? Is it he or the devils who upshot his poor brain and turned him from man to devil—say?"

CHAPTER IX.

NATHAN WINTERGREEN, FROM VARMAOUNT

"WELL worth viewing, isn't it, lady?"

Colonel Lawrence Beaumont uttered these words, still further pointing his meaning by giving a graceful sweep with his sword-arm, more particularly limiting that view to the Lazy B Ranch buildings and their immediate surroundings.

The home-structure was larger than ordinarily found upon a *ganaderio*, spreading over considerable space without rising to a greater altitude than two stories at any point.

Well apart from this structure lay the bunk-houses and other out-buildings for use or accommodation to the cowboys and such other help as might find employment on that wide-spreading property.

Still further away showed the home-corals and a few cow-sheds.

Far as the unaided eye could reach the land all belonged to this veteran of the "Lost Cause," and as Lawrence Beaumont slowly swept his eyes over that nearly level ex-

pause, dotted here and there by some of the more domesticated animals, either grazing or at lazy repose under one or another of the numerous clumps of live oaks, little marvel that a feeling of pride should swell his bosom and cause his martial figure to draw still more erect in the saddle.

His fair companion gave a languid assent to that proud query, and her gaze followed his for the moment; but then they turned away, gazing at vacancy, a troubled light entering her great blue eyes.

Very beautiful this maiden looked, just then, sitting her spirited mount with unconscious grace and security, seemingly part and parcel of the thoroughbred, so perfect was her poise.

She was rather taller than the average of her sex, but with so justly proportioned lines that this fact passed without notice until she was seen in close juxtaposition with other women.

A perfect blonde, with yellow hair, soft and silken, almost light-hued enough to pass under the designation of flaxen, yet too sunny for that colorless term.

Her eyes were blue as the summer sky then above their heads; a faint tinge of rose marked her cheeks and lent expression to her almost too regular features.

Just now her face wore too sad a look to be in perfect keeping with day or with weather, to say nothing of her perfect health and youthful years; and her companion, more annoyed than surprised at her silence, frowned darkly and bit his mustached lip sharply as he glanced half-covertly toward that too pensive face.

A deeper tinge of color shot into his bronzed visage, and an angry, half-menacing glitter came into his keen black eyes, while the band with which he had been calling more particular attention to his wide possessions, closed in a grip that betrayed something of his quick, imperious temper.

Yet, Lawrence Beaumont had for years held command of his fellow-men, as planter before the civil war, as officer during that prolonged struggle, and finally as stock-grower here on the Southwestern Border.

In commanding others, then, it seemed that he had in part learned to master himself, for he repressed the hot speech which struggled for birth, passing that opening hand swiftly over his own face, smoothing out those wrinkles and driving away that ugly frown.

Just then there came an excuse which was more than welcome to the veteran, and he uttered a low ejaculation which served to break the musing spell to which Blanche Beaumont had fallen subject.

"Look yonder!" his right hand rising to direct her gaze. "What now? Looks like the boys had roped a maverick of some sort!"

A little squad of human beings had suddenly come into view of the two equestrians by turning one of the little mottes of live oaks, halting abruptly as they caught sight of the rancher.

The majority of the party were mounted, but at least one of the half-dozen was afoot, and though nearly a third of a mile lay between those two points, Colonel Beaumont could make out that this pedestrian was either bound, or had the loop of a lasso drawn snugly around him, pinning arms tightly to his sides.

Just long enough to make this out; then, as the men beyond began to dismount, the ranchman spoke swiftly to his companion:

"This is hardly food for your eyes or mind, Blanche. Please pass on to the ranch, will you? I must—Excuse me, daughter?"

The maiden's cheeks had paled at that sight, but when she spoke there was no sign of fear or trembling in her tones.

"If you so wish, sir; only, there shall be no lynching, no hanging! Promise me that, sir, else I will come yon way instead of riding to your will, Colonel Beaumont!"

"Of course not; I promise all—now, please go, Lady!" hurriedly uttered the rancher, wheeling his steed quickly, the sun's rays glancing brilliantly off the silver coins with which his garments were so liberally bedecked, after the Mexican fashion.

Very like a Spanish cavalier, Lawrence Beaumont looked, too, as he rode swiftly toward the live-oak motte where the little squad of cowboys had dismounted and seemed busied over their captive.

From crown to sole he was trigged out as a Mexican ranchero of the more wealthy and aristocratic class, and his chestnut thoroughbred was likewise provided. high-horned saddle, the seat, skirts and stirrups richly stamped and bedecked with silver-headed nails.

The rapid stroke of his steed's hoofs warned the cowboys of his approach, and turning more squarely in his direction, they afforded him a fairer view of the stranger, now freed from bonds or from lasso-loop.

"What's the matter here?" sharply called forth the ranchero as he tightened rein, checking his steed when only a few paces from the footmen.

"You tell, Bronson!"

The cowboy thus singled out by name, moved a trifle more to the front, shifting his pliant "blacksnake" to his left hand as its mate rose to rest lightly upon an arm of the stranger.

Clearing his throat vigorously, masking his lips as he turned his head to expectorate, Bronson began:

"Waal, boss, ye see the idee of it all is kinder like this yer: which we jumped a stray maverick on the range, and jest roped the critter on the off-chance. An' so—waal, boss, right hyar ye hev him, an' ef we've done what we didn't ought, why I reckon I'm the hoss he wants to curry down fer to git his even-upness—see?"

During this deliberate speech, the veteran's still keen eyes were passing up and down that tall, gaunt, peculiarly-garbed figure, a dawning smile lending a kindlier expression to his stern visage.

"Who are you, stranger?" demanded the colonel, scanning the Yankee with keen curiosity. "And, what are you, pray?"

"Waal, squire, as to the who," began the stranger in strongly nasal tones, "I rayther calculate yeou won't go so mighty far astray ef yeou call me Nathan Wintergreen, from West Newb'ry, Orange Caounty, Varmount."

That smile broadened into a brief laugh as eyes and ears aided each other in summing up this oddity; then Colonel Beaumont exclaimed:

"Well, you do look like it, for an honest fact, sir! One can scent wooden nutmegs and basswood hams in your every tone!"

"Waal," drawled Nathan Wintergreen, his head cocking a bit to one side as he looked up into the face of the stockman, "ye hev got a rayther sharp-p'inted sneller, hev'n't yeou, squire?"

A low snicker broke from one of the cowboys, and all of them grinned at this sharp hit. The colonel flushed hotly, for his temper was a very sensitive one, and when he spoke next 'twas in far less placable tones than the ones he had so far made use of.

"What brought you here, anyway? Who gave you leave or license to come skulking over my grounds?"

"These is the bringers, squire," and Nathan Wintergreen complacently viewed his long legs and coarse horse-hide boots as he lifted them, one after the other, to meet a saluting palm. "An' as fer the rest, is it sech a mighty crime, squire, fer a honest man to hunt for honest work at honest wages?"

"Work! You?" with his mustached lip curling in scorn. "What sort of work are you fit for in this part of God's country, Yank?"

"Waal, neow, will yeou hear tew that, Jemima Ann!" ejaculated Nathan, both hands going up more in amazement than in protest, it seemed. "What kin I dew? Me? Nathan Wintergreen from— 'Oh, git eout, yeou!'"

"Mebbe he takes it fer a sheep-walk, boss, whar all sech light-weight trash mostly floats," suggested Bronson, with a sniff of lofty scorn.

"No I deon't, nyther, neow!" sharply retorted the Yankee tramp, frowning a bit as he flashed a look from his keen blue eyes into that sun-bronzed face. "Take me for a blamed niggerramus, deon't ye? Think I deon't know nothin', mebbe? Waal, that's whar yeou git left, stranger!"

"Since you claim to know so mighty much, Yankee, explain a bit further, please," added Colonel Beaumont with ominous politeness. "This is a stock-ranch. What service

can you perform which would justify me in giving you wages, pray?"

Nathan Wintergreen tossed back his lank locks, chest swelling out fuller as his hands went up to insert thumbs in arm-holes, his wide mouth seeming to grow still wider as he laughed heartily.

"Waal, squire, ef yeou cain't show up funnier 'thout meanin' of it jest that way, than any other critter I ever met, then I'll eat my old hat and swear it's tender-line!"

"What sarvice kin I render that's wu'th payin' fer? Waal, takin' it fer airnest when mebbe yeou're only jokin', square, let me tell ye."

"I kin dig, plant or harvest. I kin mow a swath as wide as the next best man, an' hev time fer a second nap at the yon' end while he ketches up with my leavin's."

"This is a cattle-ranch, not a truck-patch, Yankee!"

"Thank yeou fer nothin', squire, when I kneow more'n that much by my own lookin' eyes. Yeou wanted to kneow what I mout be able to dew that was wu'th payin' a hand fer, an' so—I'm tryin' tew tell ye, squire!"

"I'm a masterhand about the house when thar's chores tew be done fer the wimmen-folk, an' I kin split more light'ood than the man that fu'st 'vented kindlin' fires!"

"I kin pail the keows, ride the hosses tew water, feed the chickens an' slop the pigs an' fold the sheep an' bed down the critters an'—neow I'm comin' to the marrer of the bone, squire!"

"I kin do more with a yoke o' balky steers, squire, than the smartest help yeou've got on all yeour farm! I kin— Like this, then!"

With a swift movement, Nathan Wintergreen snatched at the well-oiled blacksnake-whip held in Bronson's hand, securing it and then leaping aside a couple of paces the better to give his talents full swing.

"Whoa-haw, Buck an' Brandy! Git-ap, yeou Blaze an' Ball! Stiddy all, an' I'arn to peddle, will ye, neow?"

That strong right arm swung the pliant whip around, making it crack equal to a freshly-loaded revolver, the biting cracker cutting a narrow slit through the heavy canvas trousers worn by Bronson, who leaped high into the air with a howl of mingled pain and rage.

"Gee, ye pesky critters!" cried Nathan Wintergreen, wielding whip with the skill of a past master in the art. "Walk a chalk, yeou Buck an' Brandy! Buckle deown tew the— Whoa ap! Jump over the chain an' turn yoke, will ye, neow?"

For the cowboy, smarting from the lash yet stung still more bitterly by the smile of his master and the boisterous guffaws of his mates, now reached for a revolver and jerked it out of its spring-top scabbard.

Few men on Lazy B Ranch could handle a gun with greater "fluency" than Ike Bronson, but Nathan Wintergreen was proving himself no less an expert with the blacksnake, and almost before the black muzzle cleared the leather, a deft swing of lash, a swift jerk, then the revolver was fairly torn from the stung hand of its rightful owner, to go sailing high in air, falling to earth fully two-score yards away!

"Fair warnin', yeou!" sharply cried the Yankee, his armed hand in readiness to make his thinly disguised menace good in case of need. "I cain't say yeou're ary tew pritty right neow, but if I hev to dew or be done—waal, I kin widen that meouth of yeours from ear tew ear, an' all the way back ag'in by the other raoute!"

"Steady, men!" sternly commanded the colonel. "He who tries to burn powder without my word for it, must answer to me. Bronson—"

"Kin he lash me like a dog, boss, an' me never once kick?"

"We'll settle that later on, Bronson. For now—go get your gun, but don't try to make any other use of it, please."

When Lawrence Beaumont spoke so softly, his white-mustached lip curling back just a trifle, those who knew him best knew that he was by far the most dangerous.

The cowboy sullenly moved away to secure his weapon, while Beaumont leaned over the pommel of his saddle, eying the stranger closely before speaking again:

"Who and what are you, stranger?"

"Nathan Wintergreen, from West New-

b'ry, Orange Caounty, Varmount." glibly repeated the real or counterfeit Yankee, but Beaumont cut in with:

"Too thin, sir! We're not play-acting now, so—truth, or hang!"

CHAPTER X.

THE YANKEE TRAMP'S PERIL.

As Colonel Beaumont spoke thus, his right hand dropped to pistol-butt, but if he counted on frightening that odd being, he was fated to meet with disappointment.

"Dew tell!" drawlingly exclaimed Nathan Wintergreen, deftly tucking blacksnake under an arm, his hands slipping into wide-mouthed pockets as his coarsely-shod feet slipped further apart, all producing a ludicrous resemblance to the typical "Uncle Sam."

"You are playing a part, sir," sternly declared the colonel, flushing hotly before that quizzical gaze, yet too proud to betray more open resentment before his cowboys. "You are not what you pretend, and—"

"Waal, squire, not tew take the words right eout of yeour meouth, though! Waal, then, what of it?"

"Why are you here? Why have you assumed such a title, when—"

"Waal, neow, squire, is it sech a mighty sin, then?" drawlingly asked the strange tramp, arching his brows widely. "Be I the fu'st man who left his right name behind when he crossed the Texas line? An' as even the poorest tramp must hev some sort o' name, an' as I couldn't well leave my twang with that cast-off name— Yeou understand, squire?"

"I plainly understand that you are here in disguise, and I begin to believe that you are—"

"As good a hand to hire as yeour level best, I'm calculatin', neow, squire," coolly cut in the tramp, but casting aside in goodly measure his bantering tone for one more befitting the station he proposed to fill for the future. "Buy me, an' try me, as the patent medicines say, squire. Take me 'cordin' tew d'rections an' I'll dew ye mighty good!"

Before any reply could be made to this speech, the rapid clatter of shod hoofs came to their ears, and turning his head in that direction, the colonel recognized his only son, Jefferson Lee Beaumont, riding at top speed toward the little gathering.

The young man's face was hotly flushed, and as he came nearer, it could be seen that his black eyes were glittering fiercely; while his armed right hand swung upward from his hip as he reined in his snorting steed, only a couple of yards from the man at whose head his sights were drawing in line.

"Hands up, you infernal spy!" he cried, shrilly, at the same moment.

"Hold, son!" sternly commanded Colonel Beaumont, with a deft jerk of his bridle wheeling the chestnut horse directly between those two men.

"That's what I say, tew," spoke up the Yankee tramp, right hand lifting with open palm to the front. "Flag of truce, squire! Even if this is Texas, let a pore critter kneow what mighty sins he's bin doin' of, afore yeou butcher him—yes, sir!"

Colonel Beaumont reached out to push that menacing weapon aside, sternly uttering:

"Steady, my son! Of course you would not act thus without good excuse and ample justification; but, what is the matter? Who is this fellow that you should honor him with your anger, my son?"

"Who is he, do you ask?" harshly cried the young man, fairly straddle with rage or hatred, it seemed. "Who but a cursed spy, come here to work more evil than—"

"Stiddy, young sir!" sharply cut in the man charged with such audacity. "I'm a peaceful pusson, but when yeou call me so mighty fur out of my rightful name—waal, that's food for libel lawyers—it is, neow, fer a scandalous fact, sir!"

"You call him a spy, Jefferson, but a spy in whose service?" the colonel asked, gravely.

"That's just what I'd like tew kneow, tew!" again cut in the tramp. "Tell me in whose sarvice, young sir, so's I kin begin tew draw my reg'lar salary! Dew tell, neow—or stand up in the corner with finger in yeour maouth as a base prevaricator (which is liar, fer short)!"

This second interruption was not altogether without effect, although it is not so certain that the Yankee tramp intended matters to take that precise turn.

Colonel Beaumont glanced his way, a peculiar glow deepening in his black eyes, his white mustaches and pointed imperial quivering a bit under emotions which were not so readily interpreted.

The hand which had pushed aside the weapon gripped by his son now gave a warning pressure to that arm, and the eyes of father and son met for an instant.

In those of the elder gleamed a silent caution; then he turned toward the tramp and the waiting cowboys, speaking coldly:

"Enough of this foolish by-play, all Bronson!"

"Up an' ready, boss!" answered that worthy, with an evil glitter in the eyes which flashed briefly upon the stranger, then turned again to the face of his master. "Shell I rope the maverick, boss?"

"Not now, Bronson. Time enough to punish when we have settled on the crime, son—"

"Neow I'll tell yeou what's an honest fact, squire," gravely spoke up Nathan Wintergreen in his own behalf. "My very worst crime is bein' a Green Maounting boy, an' talkin' as my forefathers talked. That, an' in bein' pesky fool enough tew think a Yankee could find honest pay for honest work 'way daown here in Texas—so thar!"

Nathan Wintergreen tossed aside the blacksnake which he had shown so much skill in handling, then shrugged his shoulders like one who, having said his say and put in an ample defense, feels that whatever may befall is no fault of his own.

In spite of prejudice which, in common with many Southern born men, he could not help feeling, the gallant Colonel Beaumont was a little more favorably impressed with the stranger after this blunt yet manly speech, nor was he ashamed to show as much in tone and manner.

"You will escort this man to the quarters, Bronson; and you, lads. Keep him there until I come, or send for him. Meanwhile, treat him white; use no violence, unless he actually tries to run away."

"Ef he tries that on, boss?"

"Stop him, of course. Unharmd, if possible, but—stop him!"

"Holy smoke! I'd give a leg ef the dirty whelp would try fer to make a break of it, now!" viciously growled Bronson, but speaking louder than he thought, since the colonel caught his full meaning.

"On second thoughts, Bronson, you may take horse and ride over to Black Jack Ranch. Say that I wished to learn how Mrs. Morgan's cough is progressing. And—you can do the honors for this stranger, Quirk."

Bronson smothered a vicious malediction, and Nathan Wintergreen grinned broadly, so differently were the two men affected by that same command.

His men had long since learned to give prompt obedience to whatever orders might fall from those stern lips; so, doggedly mounting his horse, Bronson galloped away, while his mates, in charge of the Yankee tramp, moved more leisurely in the direction of the bunk-houses.

Young Beaumont scowled ominously as the Yankee glanced at him in moving off, but his white teeth remained tight-locked until they parted at command of his parent.

"We'll ride a bit this way, Jeff," said the captain, moving at a walk at an obtuse angle with the line taken by the cowboys and Nathan Wintergreen. "I'm sorry I had to cork you up so sharply, son, but before the boys—better not talk too plainly, I fancy!"

"Better for the whole outfit if I'd blown his brains out without stopping for word or warning!" muttered the younger man, as he flashed a look after those slowly moving shapes.

"Without just cause, Jeff?"

"Who says I hadn't just cause, sir?"

"Have you, though?" doubtfully persisted the captain, knowing only too well how prone his son was to act on impulse, or, when he found it to his advantage, to stretch facts to cover fancy.

"Well, if I haven't, would I be saying all this?" angrily demanded Jeff, his swarthy skin turning almost as red as that of an In-

dian. "That rascal is an infernal spy, sent here by that cursed law sharp, Leo Crawford, who means—"

"What?" sharply interrupted the captain, his cheeks paling, but his eyes gaining additional fire. "Leo Crawford? You are sure, Jeff?"

The young man flinched from that fierce grip and fiercer gaze, but, being at least reasonably sure of his grounds, he quickly rallied.

"Let me tell you what I've picked up through trustworthy sources, sir, then you can judge for yourself whether or no I've good ground for flying off the handle, as you term it."

"Go on, Jefferson; what is it, then?"

"Just this: Leo Crawford has left San Antonio, bag and baggage. He took a friend with him—a silly, drunken coot who plays low comedy at the theater, where—"

"Where rumor says you spend more time and money than runs with the part of either good taste or of wisdom, Jefferson Lee," gravely cut in the colonel, his brows gathering in a frown, as he watched the effect of this pointed shot.

"That's all right, sir, and we'll talk about it later on, if you wish it that way," quickly returned the younger man, then adding:

"But, as I was saying, Crawford has pulled out, no person seemed to know just whither bound; but we— isn't it clear enough in your eyes, father?"

"You reckon he's heading this way, Jefferson?"

"I don't think, for I know it!" with a return of his former fierce excitement, at the same time jerking a thumb toward the quarter where Blanche Beaumont was still in sight, sitting her horse like one lost in a day-dream. "And thinking to run off with her, curse him!"

"You know it, Jefferson Lee?"

"Just as surely as I'd know it if my own two eyes had seen them, sir! They were seen—Leo Crawford and Dick Ready, the actor—by a trustworthy fellow in whom I can place implicit reliance."

"When were they seen?"

"Two days ago, just breaking camp down by the Three Springs, sir. And my man says that they headed straight as the lay of the country would permit, for the Spider Ranch!"

"Oliver Perkins's place!"

"Where Crawford found shelter after you kicked him out of this!" sharply added the younger Beaumont, once more looking toward the buildings, to add, suspiciously: "Look at Blanche! Where are those fool boys letting that infernal spy stray to?"

"Never mind him, Jeff, but finish what you were saying. Do I know this fellow of yours? Who and what is he?"

Young Beaumont gave the desired explanation, which consumed a minute or two, but all the time he kept flashing uneasy and suspicious glances toward the young lady rider and the Yankee tramp, both of whom seemed inclined to draw yet nearer to gether.

"And then, to make all sure, sir, my fellow took a little sneak over to the Spider Ranch, and only an hour ago he told me that Crawford was with Perkins, and that—Look, father!"

He pointed across to where a sudden change of course had brought the young lady close to the escorted tramp, and now—

"The deuce!" exploded Colonel Beaumont, in turn. "What's he trying to do now?"

"Delivering Blanche a message from Crawford—no less!"

"If so, I'll strip off his pelt to hang on the fence as a crow-bait!" fiercely raged the ranchero, putting spurs to his horse, viciously.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN COWL BURNS POWDER.

WITH that shrill scream ringing in his ears, the Chief of the White Caps roused from his drugged sleep to mechanically fumble at his sash for a weapon, staring dazedly around where all had been cast into utter darkness.

As is so often the case when one is so disturbed, Captain Cowl felt scared, for superstition aroused more quickly than reason, and

that dark rock chamber seemed full of unearthly sounds just then.

The heavy lamp was swaying to and fro under the well-aimed blow by which the light had been so swiftly extinguished, and the creaking of the rusted chains by which it was suspended was now added to those other sounds: the rustling of garments, the indistinct echo of footfalls upon the sandy floor.

Pausing barely long enough to distinguish something of all this, the White Hood Chief flung the muzzle of his pistol forward and fired a shot, at the same instant leaving his seat and crouching low as he sprung to the right, thinking to thus escape a return shot in case such should come from the unseen enemies.

Neither shot nor cry came back in answer, only the rumbling echoes of the explosion he himself had caused; and after waiting for a couple of seconds, the outlaw chief fired again, aiming through the darkness at the narrower passage which led away from his particular Den.

This time his burning powder produced a more startling result, for at the second shot a sharp, agitated cry rung forth, closely followed by the words:

"Hold your fire, master! Mother of Mercy, 'tis my lady!"

"Who is it that calls me master?" harshly challenged the awakened chief, his pistols clicking distinctly as hammers were lifted again.

"I—Pedro Morales, master!"

"What the foul fiend are you doing here, then?" cried Captain Cowl, still crouching low down with the rough rocks at his back, weapons to the front. "Speak, dog! What dirty trickery—"

"Hear me first, then punish if you see fit, sir," called back the lieutenant in less agitated tones. "But—my lady is here, swooning or stricken dead by your first shot!"

"You fetched her, Morales? What risky game have you been trying to play, anyway?"

"None, as the holy saints bear witness, sir! But now—the men are coming this way, in answer to your shots; must my lady be exposed to their curious gaze, captain?" swiftly spoke Morales, his voice sounding clearer and more distinct, even while its volume was lessened.

From the cave-entrance came sounds which told only too plainly that the White Caps had been startled by those shots, and no doubt deeming their chief in peril of his life, they were flocking to that generally tabooed retreat.

Thus caught between two fires, and still further hampered by the swooning woman, for love of whom he had dared so much, Pedro Morales made the best of a bad bargain, boldly facing the dilemma from which he could not escape through flight or by fighting.

The glow of at least one light made itself visible from near the cave entrance, and the lieutenant, hearing nothing further from the White Hood Chief, pressed closer to the side of that passage, standing as a living shield in front of the still unconscious woman to whose burning curiosity all this disturbance might be attributed.

"Steady, men!" he called out, sternly, before that light came near enough to expose that blanket-wrapped shape. "There is no need of—"

A flash of light came from the opposite direction, where Captain Cowl had found and ignited a hand-lamp.

Holding this above his head with left hand, revolver still gripped in his right, that famous white cowl drawn snugly back into place, the leader of the irresolute knaves sharply called forth in turn:

"And steady I say, lads! Hold your ground until— Well, my gallant lieutenant?"

He flashed that clear light squarely upon the Mexican as he stepped nearer, eyes glittering like balls of living fire through the slits in his disguise as they took it all in: that blanket shape, lying in a half-reclining, half-erect position against the gray rocks, the only visible portion of her face and arm showing marble white by contrast.

Close to and plainly shielding that unconscious woman stood the richly-garbed Mexican, weapons in hand, cocked and ready for

instant use if called upon, his face pale but hard-set, his dark eyes glowing with feverish brilliancy the while.

"Upon my honor, *Senor Don Pedro*, a pretty scene—a remarkably pretty scene, for a scandalous fact!" fell mockingly from those hidden lips an instant later.

The Mexican stepped a couple of paces nearer the chief, speaking in a guarded whisper:

"Shall I explain before all the men, *senor*, or only to yourself?"

"You really think an explanation is due, then, *Don Pedro*?"

"For the sake of my lady I ask you to send away all, chief! As for me—shall I disarm, first, *senor*?"

Colonel Cowl made an impatient gesture with his armed hand, then stepped forward in the direction of his wondering men, speaking in clear, almost laughing tones:

"Thanks for your swift rallying, my gallant lads, but 'twas merely a false alarm, caused chiefly by an idle dream. I fancied a ghost of the past was paying me an untimely visit, and so shot—neither ghost nor mortal, but my poor hall-lamp!"

"Then thar hain't nothin' fer us to bounce, boss?" hesitatingly asked one of the foremost knaves.

Captain Cowl laughed lightly, for there was no difficulty in recognizing in that cadence an implied regret.

"That thought grieves you my noble heart-eater? Well, better luck next time, and I'll agree to give you all the food for powder and steel the lot of you can get away with before this month passes by to join the great majority!"

"Bully fer that, anyhow!"

"Good luck wid the day that brings ahn the ruction, faith!"

In swift if not exactly musical chorus came these cries, mingling with still others of the same nature; but all voices grew stilled when Captain Cowl made another commanding gesture.

"That's all right, my bully boys. And now, oblige me by going back the same way you came, and if this farcical alarm has spread any further, quietly quench it, if you have to make use of the river as a dumping-ground for hot-heads. *Sube?*"

Standing thus, Captain Cowl flung his own widened shadow over that senseless woman, and evidently without suspecting aught of her agency, the reassured knaves turned and quickly retraced their steps.

Neither captain nor lieutenant spoke while this was being done, but when the last faint echo of those footfalls died away in the distance, and he knew that no other ears could catch up his words, Captain Cowl once more turned the lamp-light upon those two figures, a low, peculiar, almost mocking laugh bubbling forth from those veiled lips.

"Are you satisfied, far as we've got, *Senor Don Pedro*?" he asked, jeeringly.

"I thank you, captain."

"Don't mention it, I beg of you, dear friend! It is bliss unspeakable for me to serve you in any way, so a trifling favor such as this is really not worth mentioning!"

There was a cutting edge to his sarcasm, but the Mexican bore it without flinching.

He had not gone into this matter without duly counting the cost. He knew—none better—how pitilessly Captain Cowl would kill even his best and most highly valued ally in case suspicion should fall upon that one.

For many long weeks gone by his heart had been filled with a mad, unreasoning passion for this veiled woman whom he habitually termed "my lady," and in hopes of winning the reward he so dearly coveted, he had waited and watched, taking full advantage of the first chance which came his way, as we have already seen.

Had his passion been less intense, less honest, *Pedro Morales* might not have plunged into such an awkward dilemma; but as the veiled woman brushed so swiftly past him, to plunge into that gloomy Den, he caught a glimpse of that pale face, wearing an expression so strained, so fierce, so almost insane as it appeared, and fearing for her prudence he followed after, keeping only far enough to the rear to avoid alarming the woman by the light sound of his steps.

Then, when he saw the woman he idolized

shrink back with that wild scream of horrified affright, he knew as by instinct what must surely follow, and leaping into the air he struck out that light and then caught the recoiling woman in his powerful arms, swinging her body clear of the uneven floor as he felt her powers give way entirely, then turning to seek safety for her in swift flight.

Then came the shots from the revolver of the White Hood Chief, and close upon them the cries which told only too plainly how swiftly the alarm had spread.

Caught between two fires, there was only one hope left; and never giving a thought to his own peril, *Pedro Morales* bent all his energies to shielding my lady.

Captain Cowl, after that mocking speech, moved closer to the reclining figure, stooping over it, turning back the heavy blanket which masked her rich attire.

A scared, haunted look still rested upon her ghastly-pale visage; yet even now she looked very beautiful in at least one pair of the eyes which were now gazing upon her.

Coolly, almost rudely Captain Cowl examined that form, then giving another low, sneering chuckle as he drew back, to look into the pale face of the Mexican before speaking.

"Neither of my shots found this fair target, praises be to all your saints, *Senor Don Pedro*! Then—'twas for your own dear self that you called for a truce so lustily, my bully boy?"

"Not so, *senor*," coldly answered the lieutenant. "'Twas for the sake of my lady in part, but 'twas even more for your sake, my chief."

"Another enigma, eh? Well, nothing like having an original excuse, after all, and I don't mind if I spend a few minutes in riddling the riddle. So—Well?"

"Is it fitting that my lady should lie here, *senor*?"

"Right again, my hearty! Better she comes to in her own den, after all, so—will you act as light-bearer, dear boy?"

Instead, *Pedro Morales* stooped over that motionless figure, closing the dark blanket carefully around her form, then gently, lovingly, lifting her really substantial weight in his muscular arms.

Captain Cowl offered no objections to this substitution, watching it all, and leading the way, lamp in hand—a low chuckle passing his veiled lips.

When near the cave-exit, Captain Cowl extinguished the light, abandoning the lamp, then held aside the vine-curtain for *Pedro Morales* to pass through with his lifeless burden.

Neither man uttered a word during the brief time it took to convey the woman to her hut, where *Morales* gently laid her down on the pallet.

CHAPTER XII.

LYING FOR MORE THAN LIFE.

WITH a gentle, loving touch the Mexican smoothed down the folds of that rich dress, then turned around to face Captain Cowl who stood just inside the door, one broad shoulder resting lightly against the casement, his face entirely hidden by hood and by veil.

But, his hands were in fairer view, and one of them partly lifted a heavy revolver, muzzle turned toward his next in command as he spoke in cold, stern accents:

"Enough nonsense, my fine fellow! The time has come when you want to speak out, and to speak mighty close along the line of naked truth, unless you're really anxious to take a flying trip across the great divide, *Morales*!"

"Have I ever failed to speak you true, captain?"

"Let the past go, *Don Pedro*, and stick to the present. Now—I not only want the truth, but I want the whole truth! If that fails to come to the front—well, my next shot will not miss its mark, be sure!"

There could be no mistaking the full force of this thinly-veiled threat, and yet the Mexican showed no signs of fear or of flinching. Instead a faint smile came into his strong face, and Captain Cowl even fancied he could detect a tinge of scorn, as well.

"Step carefully, *Pedro Morales*!" he added, his tones growing harder and sterner.

"I've played 'twas an idle jest up to now, but after this it's dead-down earnest! So—explain, will you?"

The Mexican flashed a glance toward that figure lying on the rude pallet, but my lady showed no signs of rallying from her swoon, and though his anxiety on her account was naturally intense, he was still cool-headed enough to realize that this was not the proper time in which to betray that solicitude more openly.

"I will explain, and that all the more readily, *senor*, because that very explanation will prove to even you how cruelly I have been misjudged by the master I risked all to shield."

"Is that so, dear boy?" mocked the White Hood Chief.

"Be you the judge, *senor*. I left you, to look after *Ackerman*, in accordance with your commands, colonel. I found him, I warned him, and then as I turned away to ponder over this latest foul outrage committed by that insane demon, *Crazy Jack*, I thought me of the bloodhounds *Pablo Martinez* has spent so many months in training, and turned back to respectfully suggest their use to your Worship, for—"

"To run down the Mad Detective, that is?" impatiently supplemented Captain Cowl, cutting that long-winded sentence short.

"Just that, thanks," bowed the Mexican, quickly adding: "I ut, just as I came in sight of the entrance to the Den, *senor*, I caught a glimpse of some person entering—I had my suspicions, *senor*, but not being fairly certain that fancy was correct, I deemed it wisest to keep silence while I followed to make all sure."

"And you discovered—what?"

With seeming carelessness came these words, but that gloved hand was toying nervously with the silver-mounted revolver, and the barest hint of a tremor might have been detected in his tones.

"Nothing, at first, *senor*; but, as my eyes grew a little better accustomed to the change of light, I could just detect a phantom-like shape gliding noiselessly along the passage, then passing under the hanging-lamp by the rays from which I recognized—my lady!"

"Something less grim and grisly than the common run of ghostly visitants, at all events!" commented Captain Cowl, a sneer in his tones.

The Mexican paid no heed to that interruption, continuing, in the same grave, serious tones which he had from the first assumed.

"That recognition was a great surprise to me, *senor*, and I recoiled, feeling that, perhaps, I had no business there."

"Yet you lingered, *Pedro*?"

"Because of the next action, *senor*, because of the manner in which my lady moved toward the chair in which you lay sleeping, with your hood thrown back and—"

"My veil was down, though!"

Pedro Morales bowed assent to this swift interjection, then added:

"Your veil was down, *senor*, yet, even as I turned to steal back the way I came, feeling 'twas no business of mine if my lady paid my master a visit in his Den—"

"To the point, man! Curse your droning! To the point, *Morales*!"

"Your will is my Gospel, captain," bowed the Mexican, with admirably feigned humility, then, drawing his strong figure erect, he spoke in cold and distinct tones:

"My lady reached out her hand to lift your veil, *senor*, and, deeming it only a part of my sworn fealty to preserve your incognito as far as lay within my power, I sprang forward to—"

"To share in the visual feast, was it?"

"You know better, *senor*. I sprang forward and dashed out the light by which alone my lady could have distinguished what might lie back of that silken mask!"

"You doused the glim, then, *Pedro*?"

"As I have the honor to inform you, *senor*," with another low bow.

"And then?"

"And then I caught my lady in my arms as she cried out with affright at the sudden darkness, and bore her away toward the entrance. You roused up, to fire that unlucky shot which—"

"Would it have been more lucky had the lead smote living flesh in place of dead tones, *Morales*?"

"The blessed saints forbid!" fervently ejaculated the Mexican, with another swift glance toward that senseless figure on the pallet.

"Well, that particular peril is a thing of the past, Don Pedro, so I wouldn't go into hysterics. You caught my lady in your arms;—was it a very disagreeable burden, my dear Don Juan?"

It seemed as though the White Hood Chief was trying every means that offered to irritate his lieutenant, but with rare self-command the Mexican curbed his naturally fierce temper.

He was fighting for what he held far dearer than life, just now, and he dared not give way to his anger.

"In all I did I acted for what I thought was the best, senior. I put out that light in time to preserve your incognito, and then—was it a crime deserving such biting sneers, captain, if I did my poor best to get yonder lady out of the Den in time to escape the idle curiosity of your men, then?"

"Through it all you acted like a perfect paladin, Don Pedro," with another mocking bow. "Pity that you failed in that part, but the devil is mighty capricious, and will sometimes desert his most faithful ally!"

Pedro Morales flushed hotly, then his face turned even paler than before.

Like one who at length realizes the folly of fighting against such malicious skepticism, he locked his jaws, folding arms over his chest and clenching his hands like one who thus fights his own fierce temper.

For a full minute silence reigned, then Captain Cowl smacked his lips, clucking tongue against the roof of his mouth as though trying to fully decide just what sort of food or drink had left such a disagreeable flavor in his mouth.

Then he moved a little closer to the Mexican, eye meeting eye, those which looked through the white veil losing none of their fire by their surroundings.

A brief space thus, then the White Hood Chief slowly and sternly spoke:

"If I really knew, what I can only suspect, that you have played me false, Pedro Morales, I'd kill you like a mad wolf!"

The lieutenant made a swift gesture, not to assault, however, but to tear apart the clothing which covered his broad breast, laying bare the dark and hairy flesh as he boldly cried:

"Shoot, senior! Fair mark: shoot!"

Captain Cowl lifted his weapon until its cold muzzle fairly touched the firm flesh directly above the heart which throbbed so steadily through all this ordeal; but the Mexican never flinched, never changed a muscle as he gazed with stern defiance into those blazing orbs.

"I've filed the notches down until 'tis little less than a hair trigger, Don Pedro!" deliberately spoke the colonel, like one who, having an enemy wholly at his mercy, feels inclined to toy with him, much as a cat will torment a mouse.

"Shoot, senior!" sternly repeated Lieutenant Morales, in the same unshaken tones. "And if there issues a single drop of disloyal blood, draw with it a red curse across my tombstone!"

Instead of pulling trigger, Captain Cowl lowered his weapon and fell back to his former position near the door. He reached out his left hand in a contemptuous gesture, then spoke again:

"Bah! Do you think me a natural born fool, Morales? Do you take me for witless, as well as blind?"

The Mexican made no reply, but slowly restored his garments to their former state, the tip of his tongue moistening his parched lips the while.

Captain Cowl gave a short, harsh laugh at this, then added:

"Listen to me, please, Pedro Morales. It's coming high time that you and I reached a better understanding, don't you fancy?"

"I have told you all, senior."

"All you laid out to tell, never a doubt, Pedro, but, not all the truth, by a mighty sight!"

"Senior!"

"Bah! You have had your innings, Morales, now give me mine. And as my first base hit—listen:

"You played me dirt back yonder in the Den, Pedro! You watched your chance and

dropped a drug of some sort in my glass when my head was turned, and then—"

"Senior!"

"Wait, please, Senior Don Pedro Morales," mockingly cut in the White Hood Chief in his turn. After me is good manners, remember! And so—I can boil it down a little more compactly than you did your part of the farce, my dear boy, so—listen, once more!

"You dropped some sort of soporific in my glass when I was off my guard. I know that, now, just as positively as though I had followed your every movement from start to finish.

"I remember speaking of the bad taste, at the time, and that same savor still haunts my tongue and my palate! Now—why did you take so much trouble, Morales? Why did you dope my liquor, pray?"

"By all the saints, senior—" began the Mexican, only to be cut short midway in his hasty protestations by the White Hood Chief.

"I can give a straighter explanation than that, Morales. You drugged me after that fashion, then took your departure at the first fair excuse."

"You bade me go, senior, and I never—"

"Bah! Don't spoil a fairly good record for grit, Pedro, by trying to lie out of the scrape your soft heart has led you into," retorted the captain, with an impatient gesture of his unarmed hand. "Don't I know? Haven't I been taking notes at odd spells, these three months?"

"You left me, and hastened to my lady, yonder, telling her what you had done, and letting her see that you had paved the way for her to satisfy her burning curiosity. She came, she saw—more than she expected by far! Then you lied to shield her from—Steady, fool!"

For, with a snarling oath, Morales flashed forth his knife!

CHAPTER XIII.

NOT SO GREEN AS MIGHT BE.

BLANCHE BEAUMONT was in an uneasy, restless mood that day, for the past few months had given her much to think of, and though to all outward seeming her life-lines were cast in extremely pleasant places, she surely was not entirely free from care and troubles.

A cold chill crept over her frame as she turned away from the side of Colonel Beaumont, giving a last look at yonder significant group, which so strongly reminded her of a recent tragedy which, most unfortunately, had taken place almost before her very face.

Although that had been a fairly justifiable case of border retribution, 'twould be long before the awful impression was obliterated, or even grew dim on the maiden's mind.

This explains why Blanche spoke so plainly, and why she would not retire until the colonel had given her his pledge to permit no lynch-law on this occasion.

This, too, was partly the reason why the young lady made such slow progress toward the house, whither Colonel Beaumont had desired her to retire, but that dread could hardly have lasted through so many minutes, nor have caused the fair equestrian to send so many lingering glances toward the point where Nathan Wintergreen was playing his part to the best of his ability.

She saw the colonel evidently questioning the person whom his cowboys had captured, and her heart gave a spasmodic leap as she took note of the sudden stir and bustle which followed the whimsical specimen which the Yankee tramp gave of his steering ability.

"Cruel! false! Will he dare break his pledged word to— Oh!"

Clear eyed and keen-witted though she certainly was, the maiden could not wholly comprehend all that was passing in pantomime before her, but she saw enough to at least partly assure herself that Colonel Beaumont would not break his pledge, and a great deal more than enough to awaken her womanly curiosity as to who and what this stranger might prove to be.

On his part, the Yankee tramp seemed fairly well satisfied with the turn affairs had taken, a broad grin parting his lantern jaws as he watched Bronson take horse and gallop

off to execute that improvised errand, leaving the tall, lank fellow called Quirk to assume charge of this oddity from the Green Mountains.

"Waal, gentlemen, I dew hope an' trust he weon't hev to pass anywise nigh yecour new milch keows, fer ef he should cast that vinegar look o' his ontew them same pore critters, yecour'd hev clean seour milk an' nothin' better tew put in yecour coffee fer a solid week tew comel! Waal, neow, I tell yew what, that's a fact, gentlemen!"

Another subdued snicker came from the more humorously-inclined cowboy, but Tom Quirk dryly croaked:

"That's all right, stranger, ef ye kin only keep on thinkin' it that way; but ef I was standin' in them boots o' yours, I'd feel a powerful sight mo' like prayin' fer that durn broncho to break a human's neck afore he fatches it back in one piece—fer a solid fact I jest would, now!"

"That's pritty much what, too!" confirmed another.

"You bet your sweet life she jest am, now!" added Quirk, as the little squad moved off in the direction of the bunk-houses, as ordered by Colonel Beaumont. "Ike's a good boy 'nough when ye slick him down with the fur, but you—waal, looked like ye was hevin' big oodles o' fun crackin' the whip, jest then, stranger, but ef Ike Bronson don't peel yer pelt an' stretch it on a barb-wire fence, then I'll eat my hat!"

Nathan Wintergreen gave a wry grimace at this far from comfortable prediction, which the author plainly relished far more than could the being whom it most nearly concerned.

"Waal, neow, I want tew kneow? Is he sech a 'tarnal critter as all that amcounts tew, squire?"

"The woolliest hoss in all Texas, stranger, an' though he's lived too long fer ye to think o' tellin' his age by 'specin' his grinders, that same hoss hes never yit bin curried below his knees!"

"Dew tell!" murmured the Yankee tramp, seeing that something was expected of him after this impressive assertion, but for once at a loss to comprehend all that statement covered.

A vacant look came into his eyes as they roved around, dwelling for an instant upon the graceful figure of Blanche Beaumont, who was just then looking their way.

He flung up a hand in what might possibly be taken for a signal of some description by suspicious ones, but which was, probably, nothing more than one of the thoughtless gestures a man is liable to make without purpose when his feelings are more than usually stirred up.

For, an instant later, the Yankee tramp turned face toward Tom Quirk, a faint smile wrinkling his own features as he spoke again:

"Yew look like a white man, squire, an' so dew these gentlemen, but while I haven't bin so mighty long in this State, that little's bin long enough tew sheow me one thing: the hotter the climate, the pepperier the temper! An' so—kin I say something, gentlemen?"

"What's to hinder, stranger?"

"Waal, that's jest about it, I calculate! Mebbe yecour haven't noticed it, yit, gentlemen, but somehow there's a twist or a twang to my way o' talkin' which— Honest, neow, gentlemen, would yecour raally take me fer a Yankee ef somebody hedn't told ye so, fu'st place?"

Very earnestly spoke Nathan, his big eyes seeming to grow larger, his long visage adding a goodly inch to its length as he gazed wistfully into the cowboy's sun-burnt face.

Tom Quirk could not help laughing, and his mates fairly roared, that query, added to that anxious visage, was so mirth-provoking.

Nathan Wintergreen read his answer only too plainly, for he heaved a great sigh, slowly shaking his drooping head as he mumbled:

"I jest about knowed it—so I did, neow, fer a solid fact! An' yit—waal, what is, hes got to be! An' so—gentlemen?"

"You're sayin' of it, stranger."

"An' afore I dew say it all, gentlemen, let me tell yecour all that I hold no malice towards yecour; never a bit, fer a solid fact! But—waal, though I haven't bin with yecour

mighty long, I've been here long 'nough to larn one thing: a Yankee tramp daown in Texas is 'rest about as safe an' welcome an' healthy as a tom-cat in Hades 'thout claws!"

Again the cowboys laughed, for this assertion came with an earnestness so intense as to be really farcical; but Nathan Wintergreen could hardly be said to share in the mirth his words had awakened, even though the ghost of a smile came into his gaunt face.

"Waal, neow, yeou seem tew find all that mighty funny, but if yew was to be me, once, I calculate the grin would come from t'other side o' yeour maouth—I jest dew, sir! An' yit—what's the mighty odds?" he cried in more cheery tones, with another flourish of his long arm which could hardly have escaped the attention of Blanche Beaumont, since that young lady was looking their way, and even veering her leisurely course so as to cut the imaginary line not so very far ahead of the cowboys who had the Yankee tramp in custody.

"I was born 'way up in the Green Maountings—I lived at West Newb'ry, Orange caounty, gentlemen—where a body starts aout in this life a few thousand feet nigher tew Heaven than he kin daown here—meaning no slur against yeour taownship, remember, gentlemen, though."

"Waal, stranger, I was jest thinkin' meb-be ye didn't better," drily observed Tom Quirk. "We chaw a turrible sight o' *chile colorado* down in hyar, ye want to know, an' sometime a weenty speck or two of the red pepper gits inside our temper. An'—waal, Texas is Texas, an' when a critter comes to slurrin' of her, he's a yit bigger fool ef he hain't fu'st set his airthly house in order fer skippin' the range—see?"

Nathan Wintergreen meekly bowed his comprehension, again giving the cowboys earnest assurance that he had no intention of saying aught to depreciate their State.

He was merely stating a fact which his comparatively brief experience within the borders of Texas had made painfully clear to him; a man born with a twang had a mighty hard row to hoe, down there!

"What made ye come, then?" bluntly asked Quirk. "Shorely we-ell could manage without ye, an'— Why didn't ye skoot, while ye mought?"

The Yankee tramp gave a faint chuckle, though his long visage if changing at all, grew yet longer.

"Neow, squire, that's beginnin' to touch the very point I calculated tew make when I begun to tell, ye see! The way of it was jest like this:

"Paw died, an' maw she up'n merried 'nother man-critter. An' then, when the weddin'-dishes hedn't bin more'n well cleaned up, thar broke aout one of the tarnationest raows yeou ever did hear tell of, gentlemen all!

"My new step-paw got tew wearin' frills which was starched so tarnation stiff he couldn't see common truck like me; an' so—he jest tuck to walkin' right over me!"

"Why didn't ye kick?"

"Waal, naow, squire, that's jest what I did dew," grinningly declared Wintergreen, swinging his arm awkwardly once more. "I kicked. I thumped. I jest e-tarnally an' most owdaciously wiped up the kitching floor with my new step-paw! An' my maw she fell down in a fit. An' then—waal, 'peared tew me my speer o' usefulness in them parts had done tuck a bu'st, so I grabbed my hat an' left!"

"Like a durn fool comin' down hyar, eh?"

"Waal, squire, as the old sayin' hes it, I hed to go to Texas or to—ahem! An' so I come daown to Texas, as ye see. But—excuse me!"

Whether that wildly-flourishing arm had anything to do with it is by no means so certain, but the simple fact remains that the spirited animal ridden by Miss Blanche Beaumont, who was just then crossing in front of the cowboys and their charge, only a few yards distant, suddenly gave a start and a side-leap which, without at all endangering the rare seat of its fair mistress, caused her to drop her gold-tipped whip.

Nathan Wintergreen saw this little mishap, and with native gallantry he darted forward, picking up the whip and restoring it to the young lady, doffing his hat

and bowing rapidly, a genial smile brightening up his homely face most remarkably.

But with the whip likewise passed a snug little roll of paper, tied with a string to keep it in close compass, but so dexterously was the feat performed that not one of those keen-eyed cowboys so much as suspected what was going on directly in their faces.

Yet Tom Quirk felt that he was showing too much leniency, and darting forward, grasped Nathan Wintergreen by the coat-collar, jerking him rudely back as he growlingly exclaimed:

"Stiddy, dug-gun ye, critter! Pester the madam an' I'll yank the daylights clean out o' ye—jest so!"

"Quiet, sir!" sharply commanded Blanche, her riding-whip falling swiftly across those muscular hands. "If I require aid, I can call for it. This gentleman—"

"He's a durn Yankee spy, ma'am!" sulkingly muttered the cowboy, but falling back a pace as he spoke. "What does he know 'bout hosses?"

"Waal, naow, squire, if I deon't kneow about hosses, who should? Wasn't I cradled in a manger, an' weaned on oats? Wasn't I—waal, naow, I dew wonder if that's a hoss-race?" the tramp broke off, turning about, to see father and son galloping at full speed in that direction.

If so, it promised a unique ending, for, as the horsemen drew nearer, the younger Beaumont leveled a cocked revolver at Nathan Wintergreen.

CHAPTER XIV.

ACCUSED OF BEING A SPY.

"He's an infernal spy, I tell you, men!" cried Jefferson Lee Beaumont, his eyes glowing and his face hotly suffused as with one hand he held the gaping, wide-eyed tramp covered with his pistol, while wrenching up his snorting steed with the other.

"Down him, lads! Down him and search the rascal!" he added, harshly.

"Use no more violence than you must, men!" added Colonel Beaumont, at the same time grasping the reins of the young woman's horse and turning her aside.

"Father—sir!" Blanche cried, in mingled fear and anger. "What has— Stop, you coward!"

She shook a tiny but tightly clinched fist toward Jefferson Lee, who seemed only anxious to find a fair excuse for shooting down that unarmed stranger.

"Waal, naow, I want tew know!" spluttered Nathan Wintergreen, the picture of bewildered consternation just then; but, ere he could say more, or do aught else, strong hands closed upon his arms and trunk, deft feet twined around his legs, tripping him up and casting him to earth with a heavy shock.

Blanche uttered a stifled shriek at this, but Colonel Beaumont was fully equal to the occasion, his strong grasp restraining her impulse to leap from saddle to the rescue, his stern voice uttering:

"Go to the house, child! This is no fit scene for a woman, and you have—"

"Stop them, first!" cried Blanche, struggling to break away from that clutch in vain. "Bid the brutes let him up, or I'll never—"

"Let up, there, lads!" sharply called out the colonel, evidently thinking there would be both time and trouble saved by yielding part way to this feminine whim. "Let the rascal stand until— So!"

Heavily though he had fallen, Nathan Wintergreen was swift to regain his footing when those hands fell away from his person.

He gave his gaunt frame a vigorous shake as though to make sure no parts were broken or lost, then combed down his disordered locks with curved fingers, wiping the dust from his face with a torn sleeve as he bowed toward the young lady, forcing a smile with the words:

"Thank'ee, ma'am! It sheows a kindly heart fer the onfort'nit, an' as sech I thank ye, ma'am, but—"

"You'd better go on to the house, Blanche, for this isn't fit—"

"Nor are you fit sight for the eyes of a lady, Jefferson Lee!" the maiden crisply cut in, then adding in kindlier tones: "I'll not permit these brutes to molest you further, sir, and so—"

But Nathan Wintergreen shook his head,

falling back a pace as he lifted an open hand in denial.

"Thank'ee, ma'am, all the same, but I raally couldn't accept yeour g'ardeenship, I raally couldn't, neow!"

"Why linger to be insulted by one too ignorant, too worthless to appreciate your kindly motives, child?" spoke the colonel, in low, stern tones, once more forcing the head of her horse around toward the home-buildings. "Go, child. I promise you his life is safe."

The Yankee tramp evidently was gifted with particularly acute hearing, for he caught those low tones and read their full meaning.

"I'm grateful to yeou, ma'am, but yeou cain't help me none, even if I actilly needed it: which I deon't! I'm a white man, an' born free! I've committed no crime, wuss then comin' intew Texas. Kill me they dassen't, an' whip me they jest cain't, neow!"

And Nathan Wintergreen boldly faced his accuser, sweeping a keen glance over him from crown to sole, then raising his eyes again until they gazed squarely into that anger-inflamed face to sternly utter:

"Yeou said it, young squire! Yeou branded me spy! Naow you want to prove yeour words or swaller them back ag'in—yeou jest dew, fer a scandalous fact, naow!"

"I'll prove it by lifting your roof with a blue pill, you hound!" threatened the young man; but, before he could say more or do aught worse, the colonel spoke in sharp, peremptory tones:

"This way, Jefferson! You act as escort to Miss Beaumont, please. Conduct her to the house, and I'll take charge of this fellow."

Whether that young man would have found his task such an easy one is by no means so sure, had not the being who stood accused of being a spy, made a covert signal which none other saw, but which Blanche found no difficulty in interpreting as a request for her departure.

"I will go, sir, since you seem willing to use force if I rebel," she said, haughtily, eyes aflame as they rested upon the colonel's face. "But, before I go, hear my vow: if you injure this stranger without first proving him a criminal, I will leave Lazy B Ranch that same hour, and die rather than return to it—or to its owners!"

Wheeling her horse, she rode slowly off toward the house, young Beaumont following close behind in obedience to a silent command from his father.

Colonel Beaumont turned again toward the stranger whose coming to Lazy B Ranch had created such an unusual commotion, speaking in cold, stern accents:

"You stand charged with being a spy, stranger, working under the orders of and in the interest of the renegade, Garza. How do you plead: are you guilty, or innocent?"

"Waal, naow, squire, that's a question mighty easy tew answer," deliberately uttered the Yankee tramp, producing a fragment of "black navy" plug-tobacco off one corner of which he bit a generous quid before adding:

"But, comes the other question: what's the use?"

"How?"

"Waal, what's the use o' talkin' back, when yeou've already tried, jedged, an' pritty nigh executed me, squire?"

"Then you admit that you have come here as a spy?"

"No, I daon't, naow, squire, for that would be a lie. Speakin' jest fer my aown self, an' not calculatin' to convert yeour fixed opinion, then, I'll say jest this much: I'm not a spy. I never was a spy. I hope I never shall be a spy. An', tew sum it all up, squire, the critter who fu'st told yeou I was a spy, is the tarnationest, biggest, dirtiest, nastiest, peskiest, all-over-the-lyin'est liar that ever hed to lay out o' doors all night because he was so big a liar he couldn't find a house large enough to give him shelter—so thar, naow!"

Nathan Wintergreen began calmly enough, but gradually the motion of his mouth wagging tongue seemed to cause heat through friction, and at his last word, fist struck palm with a report equal to that of a pistol.

But Colonel Beaumont seemed wholly unshaken in his grim belief by that volu-

"Senor!"

"Will you hear me out, Pedro Morales, or shall I summon enough of my bully boys to button your lips and prop your ears open?"

Lightly though he spoke, there was a thinly-veiled menace in Captain Cowl's tones, and once more the Mexican yielded to a superior will.

Just then there came a low, gasping sigh from the further corner of the gloomy room, and both men turned eyes in that direction with the rapidity of thought itself.

"My lady" was reviving, there could be no further doubt. She had raised a hand part way to her head, and her full bosom was swelling higher as her lungs took on more extensive action.

"She is suffering, senor!" muttered Morales, clinching his bronzed hands tightly, plainly longing to leap to her assistance, yet hardly daring take so decided a step in the very face of the Hooded Chief.

"Then there is so much the less danger of her crossing the range," retorted the masked outlaw, his voice growing harder as his eyes glowed and glittered through the slits in his silken veil.

"If I might lend her a little aid, captain?"

"Don't you think you've been offering just a little too much of that same commodity, of late, Pedro?" sneered the chief, turning away from that reviving form like one who cared precious little whether death or life should gain the victory there.

"I swear to you, senor—"

"Bah! It's only right that a man should swear to a lie in defense of fair woman, whenever he can, by so blackening himself, aid to whiten her skirts; but—"

"Senor! If you mean to say—if you dare cast a vile slur upon my lady, that moment sees me dead or—I'll kill you like a hungry wolf!"

Lieutenant Morales certainly betrayed no lack of courage just now, stepping a little nearer the Hooded Chief as he spoke. As yet he made no motion toward drawing knife or gun, but Captain Cowl knew that either or both would come swiftly into play in case he cared to actually invite such a collision.

But before he could make reply to that fierce challenge, another gasping cry escaped the laboring lungs of "my lady," and turning again in that direction, the rivals saw her struggling to lift her head and shoulders, the veil she customarily wore falling unheeded from her ghastly pale face, her hair disordered, her great blue eyes rolling from side to side yet still unable to help her unsteady brain.

The woman raised herself with one elbow as a partial support, her other hand repeatedly brushing across her eyes as though to clear away the confusing mists born of that awful surprise.

Captain Cowl lifted a hand to make an imperious gesture toward the Mexican, then stepped closer to the side of the pallet, speaking in clear and cold tones the while:

"Coming back to earth, are you, my lady?"

With a start the woman rose to a sitting-posture, clasping her madly throbbing temples with both hands as she gazed wildly at that tall, athletic shape. Then—

"What—who are you?"

Captain Cowl laughed shortly, then said:

"Have you really failed to read the enigma then, my lady? Look once more, my angel! Now, who and what am I, pray?"

The woman caught her breath sharply, little spots of hectic coming into her cheeks as she stared at that hooded shape in silence for a brief space.

Then her painfully forced composure failed her again, and in tones so husky, so strained that only the keenest of ears and the sharpest of wits could have caught her full meaning, she cried:

"Who are you, demon? In the name of high Heaven, then, who are you?"

Captain Cowl flashed a look toward his next in command, then raised hand to his veil as he slowly, distinctly pronounced the words:

"Since you invoke the aid of high Heaven, my lady, 'twould be little less than sacrilege on my part to resist further. So, you say who I am, fair Rosalind?"

With these mocking words he flung back

some face, and with a moaning cry, the woman panted:

"Albert Illingsworth—my husband—alive and here!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A DEMON IN HUMAN GUISE.

EVERY trace of color fled from that beautiful face, and the woman shrunk back until the wall of the *jacal* hindered further recoil.

She shivered from crown to sole, like one sorely afflicted with an ague, her blue eyes widely distended, staring at that exposed countenance much as though it might have been the fabled Medusa's head.

Captain Cowl passed from smile to laugh, his jetty mustaches curling upward as those muscles contracted, giving a glimpse of his strong and even teeth.

Plainly he was enjoying this new sensation, and cared not to cut it short. Each pang which this woman suffered was to him a delicious treat, or else his face belied its master!

Startled, amazed, longing to help the woman whom he loved so madly, yet hardly knowing how that assistance could be put into shape, Pedro Morales stood there irresolute, a silent witness through it all.

"Are you so sure, Rosalind?" presently spoke up the chief, at the same time reaching back to push the door further open in order to lessen the gloom which was gradually deepening there in the *jacal* as the sun sunk to rest beyond the far horizon.

Stepping back and turning his face so as to catch all the light practicable, Captain Cowl spoke again:

"Are you certain that I am—that blessed individual, my lady? You know how many years ago grim death claimed your noble husband, and so—another loving gaze, my angel of love! Now, who am I?"

"My husband—and living!" broke mechanically from those horror-blanching lips. "And I—(God of pity! then what am I)?"

With a shuddering cry, the stricken creature covered face with hands and toppled over sideways, shivering like a leaf as she moaned in agony far too bitter for idle speech.

Captain Cowl laughed again, tossing back the silken veil to join his white hood, as though he felt no further need of either, just then.

He turned toward the Mexican, laughing as he saw how Pedro Morales stood, half-crouching as for a death-leap, one hand clutching the heavy revolver, its mate gripping knife-hilt.

The White Hood Chief made a contemptuous gesture, then spoke out:

"My lady seems hardly capable of trusting the evidence of her own eyes, dear friend, and as you have served her so faithfully in the past, surely you will not fail her now, in this her hour of sore perplexity?"

"I don't— It's all a mystery to me!"

"At least you can tell the fair Rosalind whether or no I felt at all like a ghost, only a few minutes ago, Don Pedro, when you and I took our little waltz with bullet and steel!"

"More devil than ghost, then, I'll make oath, senor!"

"That surely ought to please my loving wife, next to hearing you vow me a corpse too badly spoiled for keeping longer above ground!"

"Your wife—her husband—and I am—"

"The one fair connecting link, my dear fellow!" mockingly cried the outlaw, hugely enjoying himself. "You are the man who shall—"

That sentence was left incomplete, for just then a fierce grip closed upon his arm, and Captain Cowl turned head to see the ghastly face of Rosalind coming nearer his own, an almost maniacal light in her great blue eyes.

"My baby—my innocent darling—where is she? What have you done with her, Albert Illingsworth?"

Hoarse and gasping were the first few words, but then the woman gained strength and as she spoke that name her fingers closed so fiercely tight that Captain Cowl, strong man though he surely was, flinched as he shook his arm free with rude force.

"You can speak, then, my lady? And—"

am I ghost, or living flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone, fair Rosalind?"

"You mocking demon!" and her hand smote the villain fiercely across his jeering lips. "Where is she—where is my darling child?"

Captain Cowl recoiled from that blow, and from a corner of his eye he caught a warning glimpse of an armed hand which surely meant to seek his life in case he should give back stroke for stroke.

Turning sharply that way, he lifted a menacing forefinger, crying:

"Go slow, Pedro Morales! All's coming your own way if you had the wit to see as much, so don't spite your own good luck by playing the rank fool any longer. Now—hands off, or I'll snuff out your light!"

Turning back to the woman, he added:

"Your child, fair Rosalind? Have you forgotten how many long years have passed over our sinful heads since that memorable night when you fled with a handsomer man? Have you forgotten—"

A wailing cry escaped the tortured woman's lips at this, but without even a gleam of pity or of sympathy, the reckless villain spoke on:

"Your baby is a child no longer, my angel wife! She is— Shall I lift this veil, as well, my precious delight?"

"Show mercy—have at least a spark of humanity, you—man!" Rosalind forced herself to say, with false composure which was flatly belied by her eyes, her hands, her every fiber. "My child—where is she, now?"

"Alive and hearty, my angel! Growing in grace and beauty with each day that passes over her sunny head, and—dearest thought of all to me!—growing up in security from childhood to womanhood for—what particular purpose do you think, my angel?"

"Alive! Well! Happy!" pantingly uttered the woman, her lids drooping with dizzy emotion, one hand almost fiercely clasped above her madly throbbing heart. "And—you are not lying to me, you demon?"

"Devil a bit of a lie, my sweetness!" mocked the chief, rubbing his gloved hands together smartly, his eyes fairly aflame with unholy triumph as he gloated over this victim to his Satanic arts. "Why should I lie when the naked truth serves my purpose far better?"

"Alive? Then—oh, take me to her! Take me to my child, and after that do what you will with me!"

"How kind! How extremely generous you are—with my exclusive property, too!" mocked the heartless villain. "Take you to your child? Ah, no, my lady! For certain good and sufficient reasons I vastly prefer to fetch daughter to mother, don't you see?"

"And you will? You really will bring my Pearl to me?" chokingly pleaded the poor woman, hands clasped and trembling above her bosom as she stood in an attitude of imploring suspense before that demon in human guise.

Captain Cowl did not make instant reply, seemingly enjoying this complete surrender on the part of the proud captive who had for so long treated him with silent scorn.

But then, like one smacking his lips over a particularly rich morsel, he slowly uttered:

"Yes, I will really fetch the Pearl to the Rose, my angel! I really will bring your daughter to your arms when—when she is my blushing bride!"

For the space of a single breath, Rosalind stood like one suddenly frozen, or turned to stone. She stared with eyes that seemed unseeing, then recoiled with a gasp of agony beyond the power of words to portray.

But only for a moment. Then, as her mocker broke out into an insolent laugh, she gave a wild cry, snatching the dagger from where it nestled in her bosom, and surging forward struck straight at the heart of the soulless villain who had so nearly driven her insane.

But Captain Cowl was not a man to be often caught off his guard, and his stronger hand met hers, closing upon fingers and weapon, giving them a cruel wrench which tore away the dagger, at the same time turning far enough to cover Pedro Morales with

ready revolver in case that worthy should attempt to assist the woman he had learned to fairly worship.

"Quiet, Rosalind, and steady you, Morales! I'm still master here, and master I'll remain if I have to wade in fresh blood!"

"My child! Oh, my poor, innocent darling!" faintly moaned Rosalind.

Retaining her dagger, Captain Cowl flung the woman back to her pallet, upon which she sunk like one wholly unnerved, while he added:

"Quiet down, you silly fool! Act a little more sensibly, Rosalind, if you ever hope to see your child again! That I swear you shall, provided you don't ruin all through playing the infernal fool—as you have just been playing it!"

Turning away without waiting for reply or further questioning from the hysterically sobbing woman, Captain Cowl made a gesture which was readily interpreted by the Mexican; it bade him follow; and, hardly knowing just what to do, he obeyed his master as the easiest of all!

The Hooded Chief closed the door behind them as Morales stepped out into the rapidly deepening twilight, then with careless ease slipped a hand through the nearest arm of his lieutenant, moving lightly away from the *jacal* within the rude walls of which so strange a scene had just found an ending.

The night was perfectly clear, and though the moon had not yet arisen, the twinkling stars afforded light sufficient for his purpose, and as being safer from possible eavesdropping, the White Hood Chief took to the open ground instead of passing under the trees or into the chaparral.

Turning so as to face his next in command, withdrawing his hand to afford them both greater freedom of motion, Captain Cowl gazed keenly into the pale and hard-set face of the Mexican for a brief space before breaking that silence.

"They say open confession is good for the soul, dear friend," he began, in soft, almost purring tones, the music of which not even the folds of that muffling veil could entirely alter. "And so—out with it, my hero!"

"What is it you expect me to confess, senor?"

"The naked truth, of course, Don Pedro. So—you are over-head and ears in love with the woman you just now heard call me husband?"

Pedro Morales caught his breath sharply at that deliberate thrust, recoiling a bit; but then he almost savagely muttered:

"She is your wife?"

The chief laughed, low and softly.

"As your own ears can bear witness, Pedro, since you surely must have heard the fair Rosalind call me by that sweet title?"

"I heard, but—I'd rather far have heard my own death-note!"

"Ah, that's rank nonsense, man, dear! What if she is my wife? What if I am her legal lord and master? Was I any the less her spouse last week, yesterday, to-day, an hour ago, even? Was I not just as much her lawful husband when you first fell in love with her big blue eyes, and began to plot and plan against me in her behalf?"

There was another brief pause, during which the two men so strangely related to each other stood face to face, each one idly toying with the weapons at their waists.

Then Pedro buskily spoke:

"I suppose all that is truth, senor, but I have at least this one fair excuse: I was wholly ignorant of what you now declare a fact. I thought my lady was free—a captive, true, yet free in the only sense I cared to consider; free for me to love, to win, to wear, if Heaven saw fit to give me such a priceless treasure! And now—I'll stake all I own, senor, and fight you for the woman you call your wife!"

CHAPTER XVII.

TOUCHING A MANIAC'S HEART.

NATHAN WINTERGREEN both looked and spoke like one who is in grim earnest, and Colonel Beaumont felt the ugly doubts which had been awakened in his mind by the words of his son gradually fading away.

Surely there was naught counterfeit in all this? Even the most adroit of professional mimics could hardly carry on an imposition so perfect in all respects as this would be?

But before the *ranchero* could decide what

response to make to the last speech of this Green Mountain tramp, another interruption came, in the shape of trampling hoofs and a shrill, frightened shout.

Instinctively both men cast glances in the direction taken by Blanche Beaumont, who had so proudly ridden away after letting fall her threat; but the alarm did not emanate from that quarter.

The young couple were still visible, not far from the home-building, but with reins drawn as though a dispute of some nature had arisen between the maiden and the young man whom Lawrence Beaumont had bidden act as her escort.

Sharper of ear, or else less sensitive in their chivalry, the cowboys wasted no time by looking in the wrong quarter for a solution of this fresh interruption, and now Tom Quirk cried out:

"Looky yander! 'Nother stranger, an' ridin' like he hed to git thar or be done got—that's what!"

"An' right to his tail's the p'izen critter what's gwine fer to do the gittin', too!" cried another of the cow-punchers.

Although at a casual glance the wide expanse of ground surrounding the ranch buildings lay level as a floor, in reality there was a natural terrace lying something like a quarter of a mile distant, to the west; and, just topping this and thus abruptly rising into fair view of the little party, two horsemen were riding at top-speed.

Not in company, but one riding ahead of the other, as though a race for dear life was being hotly contested.

From the horseman in advance came that shrill shout, and now, crouching low in his saddle and turning his head backward for another look at his pursuer, he wildly plied his braided quirt and savagely plunged his armed heels into the steaming flanks of his jaded mount.

Then, once more looking ahead, he gave another shout, this time his appeal being beyond mistaking:

"Help! Save me from—for love of Heaven, help!"

And, either because that haven was nearest, or else through fancying that safety was more likely to be found in the presence of fair woman, the fugitive veered slightly, heading straight for the spot where Blanche Beaumont sat her horse, gazing wide-eyed upon the chase.

For that chase it was none could longer doubt.

Only a few rods behind the fugitive rode the second horseman, one arm swinging a heavy rifle over his head, the other making swift circles with an outward rim of light as the rays of the summer sun were reflected from the bright blade of his knife.

Then, hoarse, fierce yet mocking, came the wild slogan:

"Kill—kill—kill!"

All this was taken in at a single glance, as it were; then, seeing whither the fugitive was now heading, Colonel Beaumont uttered a cry of mingled anger and apprehension, sending his horse forward as he exclaimed:

"To them, men! It's that mad devil, Crazy Jack! Yo your young mistress, then!"

"Git thar, Eli!" squealed Tom Quirk, putting his long legs in motion as he raced along in the dust kicked up by the heels of the captain's horse. "Who is it, anyhow, boss?"

"One of our men, of course, and that crazy devil— To the house, Blanche!" his voice lifting higher as he waved a warning hand.

But, instead of taking to flight, the dauntless maiden struck aside the hand which young Beaumont reached out by way of restraint, giving her spirited mount a touch of the spur that sent him bounding ahead to meet the fugitive.

"Help— Thank the Lord I've got— Off, ye bloodsucker!" excitedly panted the pale-faced fugitive, wheeling his jaded horse around to the rear of the maiden, like one who feels security may there be found.

"Hut! hut! hut!" laughed the Mad Detective, wildly, borne swiftly forward by Red Ghost. "The devil flees, but all in vain! Come to my arms, ye pup of Satan! Come to your fitting reward, ye skulking coyote of midnight! Come, for the doom is written and vengeance is growing afield!"

The hunted man gave a snarling cry at this, and like one whose lost nerve begins to rally in the presence of others, he drew a revolver and resting it upon his bent left arm as a support for the unsteady tube, tried to bring the sights in sure line with that oncoming foe.

Blanche turned at that vicious sound, and with a sharp cry of reproof and warning, her riding-whip fell across that armed hand, stinging flesh so smartly that the weapon swung aside, its owner's murderous intentions foiled for the instant at least.

"For shame, sir!" Blanche exclaimed, her eyes flashing, her face marked by twin spots of brilliant color the while. "He is not accountable for— Would you shoot an insane creature, sir?"

There was time for nothing further, for Red Ghost came plunging up with its mad rider, and Crazy Jack with eyes ablaze and teeth showing in a fierce grin, cried aloud:

"Devil! Come—come to the feast, ye devil!"

Young Beaumont flinched perceptibly, his swarthy face turning an ashen-gray hue. The fugitive recoiled with a low cry. But Blanche Beaumont dauntlessly swung her steed across to bar the further passage of Red Ghost, one little gloved hand flying out to clasp that quivering arm, her big blue eyes looking without fear into those wild orbs.

"Vengeance is mine, said the Lord!"

As the madman checked his horse and stared wildly at this fair vision, Blanche let her hand fall from his arm to the cold barrel of the Winchester, forcing the muzzle down and to one side, swiftly adding:

"Surely you would not act so rudely in the presence of a lady, Mr. Jack? For my sake—for your own sake, then—do no evil!"

"Back, child!" hoarsely cried Colonel Beaumont, his unusually pale face betraying his great anxiety on her behalf. "In between them, son! If harm comes— Off with you, Crazy Jack!"

Stung by that stern call to duty, Jefferson Lee sent his steed forward, right hand armed as by instinct; but, once again his well-meant efforts were openly scorned by the maiden, who seemed to have taken a particular spite against him that day.

"Let be, sir! I need no help of yours, and— Is there not one true spark of manhood among ye all, then?"

Something like despair echoed in her strained voice, for Colonel Beaumont came dashing up, pistol in hand, while not far behind raced his cowboys, equally well armed.

Jefferson Lee had recoiled at her stern speech or her uplifted whip, yet his gun remained in sight, while only a few feet further to the rear showed the fugitive, who seemed only too willing to take a covert shot at his dreaded enemy, now he had a living barricade back of which to crouch.

Only Nathan Wintergreen seemed to share the maiden's views, and he could do little more than offer her oral aid.

"Waal, naow, squire, yeou cain't in common decency haold a crazy critter 'caountable fer his dideoes, jest so he daon't actilly commit murder, or sech like dewin's. An' so—I'm with ye, ma'am, tell the keows come hum fer milkin'—I be so, naow!"

While he was volubly pouring forth this declaration of law and principles, Nathan Wintergreen edged around the little gathering, coming close to the side of the fugitive, in whom he seemed to recognize one of if not actually the most dangerous element, so far as the Mad Detective was concerned.

He reached up to close fingers upon that armed wrist, at the same time speaking in low but significant warning:

"Waal, naow, stranger, I wouldn't shoot ef I was yeou! I wouldn't even think of shootin' from back o' kiver, fer that gun is one o' the sort that kil's both ways; an' it'll blow yeou clear over t'w the kingdom of glory ef yeou dist tew pull tri' ger; twill, naow, fer a senebloos fact, squire!"

During this bit of by-play, matters which had looked so threatening at first began to calm down, thanks to Blanche Beaumont.

Even the captain held back for the moment, surprised by this great alteration in the usually amiable, even drinking maiden.

But the greatest change of all was in the

looks, actions and manner of Crazy Jack, the Mad Detective.

From the instant when that little hand touched his arm and those big blue eyes gazed into his wild, blood shot orbs, he seemingly forgot both his vengeance and the "devil" whom he had chased to that spot.

That deadly rifle fell from his grasp, and his trembling hand went up to brush across his eyes, then clasped tightly across his vein-marked temples as he slowly leaned forward, gazing eagerly yet fearfully into that beautiful face.

"Is it—my Pearl?" he muttered, huskily, that catch in his tones sounding more like a sob. "Have I at last found my blue eyed baby? Can it be that—but—no! She was a babe, and this—"

Another dash of the hand, an almost fierce shake of his head in a pitiful effort to clear his sorely bemused wits, then Crazy Jack tremblingly touched the maiden's arm, brokenly speaking:

"You are not—tell me true, angel! You are not—can it be possible that you are my—my Rosalind?"

Tears dimmed those big blue eyes, and Blanche did not find it so easy to speak; but that pitiful appeal must be answered, and she said, in gentle, sympathizing tones:

"No, my poor man, I'm neither your Pearl nor your Rosalind. I'm only Blanche Beaumont, but—Heaven knows how sincerely I pity you, sir!"

Impulsively Crazy Jack bent his head lower, pressing a kiss to the gloved hand, then drawing back as though frightened by his own action.

But twin spots softened that soft kid, and Blanche could feel his grateful tears warm upon her wrist!

It was hardly to be expected that Colonel Beaumont would rest contented with filling a minor part where he was accustomed to take the lead in all matters, and now he pushed to the front, sending his steed in between the two animals, forcing Crazy Jack back a couple of paces as he sternly demanded:

"What does all this racket mean, anyway? Who is this stranger, Crazy Jack, and why have you been hunting him like a mad wolf over my grounds? Speak up, can't you, man?"

Instead, the fugitive volunteered, briskly enough:

"He can't show law nor reason, sir! I never did him harm, but was just peaceably going my own way, when he jumped me like a coyote after a fat jack! I never harmed him, for—"

"Liar!" fiercely cut in the Mad Detective, lifting a clinched hand and shaking it menacingly at the fellow. "Never harmed me? You were one of the masked devils who blasted my life, ruined my hopes, shattered my mind! You are one of the devils in human shape whom I've registered an oath before high Heaven to kill at sight; and now—"

"For my sake—peace and forgiveness!" said Blanche riding nearer, with hand raised in silent pleading, as well.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PEARL OF GREAT PRICE.

THE Mad Detective caught his breath sharply at this gentle appeal, and as he gazed steadily into that beautiful face, the fierce glow once more began to fade out of his deep-sunken eyes, the welish hunger to vanish from his gaunt visage as well.

"If not for my sake, then," gently added the maiden peacemaker, gaining fresh hope by seeing those changes for the better, "forgive this man, for the sake of your dear, lost darling!"

Crazy Jack started at those closing words, shaking himself like one just waking from a dream, then bowed respectfully before the maiden, rising again to utter:

"For your sweet sake, fair lady! For your sake I'll postpone my just and long-past-due vengeance. But—to you, devil!" his eyes flaming afresh as they turned upon the fugitive.

Lifting a clinched hand and shaking it menacingly, the Mad Detective cried aloud in harsh tones:

"Take your worthless life from those fair lips, you hound! Live on for the present,

but beware the day when next we meet! Beware that hour, I say, for in that hour you die the death, devil that you are!"

With that savage warning hot on his lips, the Mad Detective wheeled his horse and galloped swiftly away, casting no look backward so long as he remained within that field of vision.

With this vanishment the fugitive began to show a little cheap bluster, like one who feels he has hardly been playing a creditable part during the last few minutes.

"It's thanks to the young lady, even more than he reckons, maybe! If it hadn't been for her, I'd have blown his fool roof off, crazy or no crazy!"

"Waal, naow, I want tew know!" drawlingly ejaculated Nathan Wintergreen, lifting his hands in exaggerated amazement. "An' all the time I actilly calculated yew was jest nigh about skeered clean daown intew yeur beutes—I did, fer a scandalous fact, squire!"

"That's all right, if you only think that way, stranger, but, all the same, if it hadn't been for being in the presence of a fair lady, I'd have plugged him center, crazy or only born that way!"

Colonel Beaumont had no love for a brag-gart at any time, and now he moved a trifle closer, coolly speaking:

"Shall I call Crazy Jack back, stranger? No doubt he'd willingly take his chance, even against—you!"

The stranger flushed at this, but seemed at a loss just what answer to make, and the ranchero added:

"Or, if you prefer, sir, there's nothing to hinder your following hot on the track of the man you preceded here."

"Well, I could do all that, too, but business comes first, I reckon. Now, you're Colonel Lawrence Beaumont, I take it, sir?"

The veteran bowed stiffly. "All right, sir. Then I reckon this bit of paper will serve to introduce the bearer," quietly added the stranger, bowing slightly in his turn as he held forth a hand in which gleamed a sealed note.

Tearing this open, Colonel Beaumont took in its brief contents at a glance, his face turning paler as he read.

Flashing a look over the little congregation, he spoke:

"Jefferson, wait upon Miss Blanche. Quirk, look after Mr. Wintergreen as I bade you before. I'll see him later. Now, will you follow me, sir?" he added, turning once more toward the messenger.

"With the greatest of pleasure, colonel!" Riding up to the front of the home-building, the two men alighted, dropping reins over the rack planted there for that purpose, then Colonel Beaumont led the way into the house and direct to his particular quarters, where he motioned toward a chair as he spoke:

"Be seated, sir. This paper is—"

With audacious coolness, the fellow reached forth a hand, dexterously securing that opened note, then deliberately repeating the few words written therein:

"Greeting from him who placed a Pearl of great price in the care and safe custody of Colonel Lawrence Beaumont!"

"What the deuce— How dare you, sir!" ejaculated the old soldier as soon as he could rally from his amazed indignation.

"Well, colonel, where's the mighty harm, when the gentleman who penned those lines showed them to me before he stuck on the seal?" coolly spoke the messenger, holding forth the rolled note.

"He showed— What do you mean, sir?" stammered Beaumont, as he accepted the paper, twisting it nervously between his long, white fingers.

"Just what I'm telling you, colonel. The boss showed me what he wrote, so I could deliver the message by word of mouth in case anything should happen to the note: understand?"

"Then this man confided wholly in you, sir?"

There was a brief hesitation, during which period the messenger may have been weighing the advisability of making some such comprehensive claim; but if so he thought better of it, speaking with real or well-assumed frankness:

"Well, hardly so much as that, colonel.

It's just as I told you: the boss showed me what he wrote, so I could repeat it by word of mouth in case I lost the paper. I only looked to make sure there had been no mistake on either side."

"Then this mysterious note is all?"

"Well, it don't tell much, for a fact, colonel," with a brief grin. "Still, maybe I can manage to supply what's lacking, if you give me anything like a fair show, sir."

Colonel Beaumont slowly untwisted that bit of paper, once more letting eyes rove over those boldly-shaped characters. Then, after a long and seemingly painful breath, he lifted his gaze to find the messenger eyeing him with a half-sneering curl of the lip.

"You say you can supply what information may be lacking, sir?"

"Well, I can make a flutter at it, anyway, colonel!"

"Then—who wrote this note?"

"The boss."

"And whom do you call 'the boss,' sir?"

"The man who wrote that note, of course!"

The fellow laughed softly, like one enjoying the jest, and this seemed to cool the old soldier instead of adding to his natural irritation.

"Until plainer words, you decline to give me that particular bit of information?" he asked quietly.

"For the present, yes," bowed the messenger, coolly.

"Let that point pass, then. Have you any reasons for feeling ashamed to pronounce your own name in the presence of a gentleman, sir?"

"Meaning yourself, colonel? Well, don't you think it, now! I'm Otto Brandagee, both white and free-born, and I'm a—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Brandagee, but I believe you declared that business took precedence of all minor interests. So pray oblige me by delivering your message, if the person you term your boss gave you any such. Your personal pedigree does not interest me in the slightest."

"That's a fair hit-back, colonel, and we'll call it one on me!" declared Brandagee, who bade fair to prove himself quite a decent sort of rascal, after all. "Now, open your ears, please."

"In the first place, the boss showed me that note, then told me to whom it was written. He bade me lose no time in getting that same paper into your hands, and when that was accomplished, I was to add what he hardly cared to set down in writing."

"Well, sir?" impatiently asked Colonel Beaumont, as the fellow broke off abruptly, flashing his keen eyes toward the shuttered window.

Brandagee arose from his seat, and, with cat-like tread, crossed the room to that window, gently canting the slats so he could look out over the wide view thus afforded.

"What are you looking for, sir?" sharply demanded the unwilling host, partly rising from his seat as he spoke.

"What I didn't want to see so mighty bad, colonel, but what I felt mighty nigh dead-sure I would see!" muttered the messenger as he turned the slats so as to cut off all espial from without in case such should be attempted.

"If this is intended as another insult, sir—"

"Don't you even think it, colonel!" interrupted Brandagee, coming back to his chair as he spoke. "I only thought—it seemed to be in my very bones that Crazy Jack was creeping up to the window for a pot shot at me!"

He swept a hand across his damp brows, forcing a low laugh the while. Baseless though that fear had proved, it had none the less given him a disagreeable shock.

"Crazy Jack will keep his word, sir, and so long as you remain here on my premises, your life is perfectly safe from his hand. After that—you and he for it, then!"

"That's all right, colonel, and we'll finish what I was about to say before we tackle that racket in sober earnest."

"I am awaiting your convenience, Mr. Brandagee."

"The boss gave me orders to hand you that note, then to add that he would shortly drop in here to talk the matter over with you, q. d. d."

"When was he to come?"

"That he didn't tell me, colonel. He'll come, easy enough. That's a way the boss has when he once passes his word to either friend or foe; but he generally picks the hour that suits himself best and his company the worst—understand?"

"That can hardly form part of your message, Mr. Brandagee," retorted the colonel. "Stick to the line marked out for you by your master, if you please. Now, what else, pray?"

"That when he did come 'twould be expressly to reach some definite conclusion in regard to that same 'Pearl of great price.' That he might be coaxed into selling the pearl if you were eager to buy, or, if not, he would take it away with him to look up another purchaser."

"Is that all?" asked Beaumont, after a brief pause, during which spell of waiting Otto Brandagee showed no inclination to add aught further to his report.

"That's all, so far as my mission from the boss goes, sir," hesitatingly answered the fellow, losing something of his airy manner, now.

"What else, then?"

"Well, that infernal Crazy Jack, your Honor!"

"The same person whom you were so eager to jump all over, only a short while ago?" sneered Beaumont, no longer seeking to mask his contempt for this rascally braggart.

"That's all right if you only think it, sir," sullenly. "But—I wouldn't mind facing him down in the open, but he's got a pizen way of jumping out on a fellow's back, and then—"

"Well, Mr. Brandagee, you're in the right so far; that crazy devil as you term the Mad Detective will surely rope you in when you cross my home-section, unless—"

"Unless what, boss?"

"Unless you can manage to give him the slip under cover of the coming night," added the ranchero. "Now, sir, if you are wise you'll profit by this little hint of mine."

"I can stop until dark, then, colonel?"

"Of course. Go to the men's quarters and ask for what you want. You have delivered your message in due form, and I've no further use for you."

CHAPTER XIX.

A RECORD WRITTEN IN RED.

PEDRO MORALES spoke like a man who meant every word that crossed his lips, just then, and though he made no move toward drawing a weapon, he stepped back like one getting on guard.

Deadly though that challenge surely was, the Hooded Chief showed neither anger nor surprise, but broke into a low laugh.

"You talk as though you really meant it all, dear fellow!" he exclaimed, a moment later.

"Put me to the test, senor, and see if I do not really mean it! Surely I have made my meaning clear to you, captain?"

"Well, a fellow might fairly be excused for failing to take it all in, don't you think, Don Pedro? To be asked to set one's loving and adored wife up as one-half the stakes in a game of cut-throat!"

"Would it be more honorable for me to slip knife or send bullet under her shoulder-blade some dark night, senor? Would it seem more manly if I stole your best horse and carried off your—my lady?"

The cowed man laughed again, but there was a little less of scorn and more of amusement in his tones now.

He cast a glance back at the *jacal* where they had left the woman he called the "fair Rosalind," giving a low grunting sound as he caught sight of a couple of the White Caps moving about.

Slipping his hand once again through the reluctant arm of his lieutenant, he moved on under the stars, muttering as he did so:

"Come on, Morales; we'll go where there are less chances for other ears to catch our secrets, then we'll finish this little matter up, you and I."

"Is it not sufficient, senor, that I offer my all—that I tell you I will stake everything I own, down to my last garment, even—and fight you for my lady?"

"Wait, Pedro, and it's barely possible that

I may give you an even better chance than that for your white alley!"

"I ask no better, senor. All I want is to—"

"Enough, Morales!" with sudden fierceness entering his voice. "I ask you to come with me for a few minutes. Refuse, and by the devil who stood godfather to us both, I'll split you wide as a salter opens a mackerel!"

The Mexican was no craven when he had ordinary adversaries to deal with, but now—that was different!

In silence he yielded, and not another word was spoken by either of the two until the camp of the White Caps was entirely lost to view.

Then, standing in the shadow cast by a single tree in the midst of a wide expanse of level ground, where it would be an utter impossibility for even the cleverest of spies to creep unseen within earshot, Captain Cowl abruptly opened the subject once more.

"You saw how powerfully my lady was affected when she took advantage of your little sleight-of-hand performance, Pedro, and—"

"Senor! must I repeat—"

"Why waste your breath and my time, Morales?" coolly cut in the chief in his turn.

"'Tis true, I was hardly ready for the unmasking, but, now 'tis done, I'm more thankful to than angry at you for the part you played in the matter."

"Then, a little later on, when I lifted my veil there in the *jacal*, you saw how powerfully my lady was moved; and why? Well, for one thing, more than fifteen years—more, I say, but we'll let it go at that figure just now—have passed over our heads since she saw the face I showed her, then!"

"Yet, you are her husband? And all these years you have—I cannot make it come clear, senor!" muttered the Mexican, huskily.

Captain Cowl laughed, shortly, bitterly.

"You can't comprehend how a man with the legal right as well as lawless might, could live within easy reach of yet never claim what you deem a priceless treasure; is that it, Don Pedro?"

"You know. Why ask me, then, senor?"

"Well, when a fellow has been a brainless idiot himself over a woman, I suppose it's perfectly natural for him to enjoy seeing another poor devil make an ass of himself," bluntly explained the outlaw leader. "But, let that pass: business, now!"

"I had ample reasons for veiling my features from the fair Rosalind, Pedro, but for some months past I have been making up my mind to banish all mystery and get down to bedrock. Still, when you—By the way, Morales, how did Eve succeed in tempting you, anyway?"

Abruptly came this query, as though he who spoke the words expected to surprise the truth through that very swiftness. If so, the outlaw chief counted without his host, for Lieutenant Morales showed no uneasiness, but in steady if somewhat dogged tones he made reply:

"I am to blame for it all, senor. If there be guilt, the crime is mine and mine only. If penalty be due, I stand ready to pay the cost. Can I say more than this, Captain Cowl?"

Once again the hooded outlaw showed grim pleasure rather than rage at being so openly defied, and there rung the echo of sincerity in his tones as he spoke out:

"That's whiter talk than I ever got from one of your race before, Pedro Morales! After all, there's goodly manhood in your make up, old *compadre*!"

The lieutenant made an impatient gesture at this blunt compliment.

"Is it merely to pass compliments that you bade me accompany you out hither in the night, senor? If so—"

"Go easy, hothead! As I was saying, 'tis so much the better, for now I know I am talking to one who stands pretty well on my own level."

"For idle compliments? Nay, Pedro, I brought you hither to listen to business, to peer backward and downward into the dark ast which the silken veil you assisted in lifting was designed to cover! And now—open thy ears, my gallant lover!"

With a brief pause, like one who is rapidly shaping the right words in his busy brain,

Captain Cowl spoke again, in swift, monotonous tones:

"When I said that for more than fifteen years the woman you term 'my lady' had never gazed upon my face, Pedro Morales, I had not fully resolved to tell you all; but now—add another half-dozen years to the record, and you'll not be so mighty far off the truth!"

"That was when the fair Rosalind was youthful—still in her teens, to be literal. That was when I—when Albert Illingsworth was not so many years more ancient, as counting goes. But—well, some men have the rare knack of condensing time, and I was a man long before my beard began to sprout!"

"What manner of man, do you ask, Pedro? Well, judge for yourself when I frankly admit that I had written my record in red letters more than once before I was twenty!"

"I'm going to hide naught from you, my good friend. I tell you the naked truth: I was born a villain, raised a tough, graduated as a 'killer' when I was scarcely sweet sixteen!"

"After that first hand in red, nothing was too daring, too wicked, too venturesome for me to tackle, and so—I caught what I fancied was a fair glimpse into paradise, and never rested until I had scaled the walls and stolen away the loveliest angel of them all!"

"My lady!" muttered Pedro Morales, catching his breath sharply, then brushing a hand swiftly over his face.

"You are right, lieutenant; my lady now, my angel then!" said Captain Cowl, with a hard laugh. "And she was just that, too, Pedro—then! I'll admit so much: I was a born devil, but Rosalind was only a little lower than the angels when we first joined our lives and our fortunes!"

"It was a romantic love-match, all the way through, Pedro, difficult as you may find the belief now, knowing all you do; but then I was on my best behavior, remember, and loved Rosalind so ardently that I could lie like Satan even while I lived like an angel—all for her dear sake!"

"That was while the honeymoon lasted, of course, Pedro! But after the sign changed, and a little of the bloom began to fade from my fruit of Paradise—when my pockets began to feel lank and penniless, and the duns to kick at my front door! That wasn't so much like heaven on the half-shell, Morales, even with my lady to share the feast!"

"Well, times grew harder and harsher. I turned a trick or two at my old profession, but easy snaps were mighty few and far between, and when I did smoke one that promised a year's rest for an hour's work, it was dead sure to be a plant, or else hard luck cheated me out of my reward just when I counted it fairly won!"

"Then—well, I took my chances on a job that I knew would pay big money if I could fetch it off, but at the same time one that carried even bigger risks of red work. And so—I did turn the trick, Pedro, but at the same time I turned a full set of toes up to the daisies!"

"You killed a man, senor?"

"Not my first *coup*, Morales, but the others—bah! What matter? It was so written ages before my coming into this world, and I was but carrying out my part of the universal record!"

"Well, I managed to get away without being caught, and, as I fancied then, without leaving any clue behind me."

"I never let Rosalind know aught about the affair, for even yet she seemed to soar 'way up among the angels, while I—you comprehend?"

"'Tis not so very difficult, senor."

Captain Cowl laughed at that dry response, but made no comment. He was in an unusually communicative mood this evening, and clearly meant to make a full confession.

"I hid my boodle in the house, for I could not think of a safer hiding-place, since I had been so careful to keep my married life separate from my purely professional career; but it was so written, and the bloodhounds of the law found the evidence—plain enough to hang a round dozen, instead of one poor devil out of luck!"

"And—my lady, senor?"

"Wait, please, my good fellow! As I said, I tried to keep all secret from my wife, but, woman is woman the wide world over, and when the bolt came out of the blue, Rosalind—wait, I say!

"The fellow I laid out for the sexton had a close friend, a relative I believe, named Rutherford: Dr. Waldene Rutherford, to be exact. And he took up the case, nosing out each and every crook and turn in the red trail I had so cunningly laid, never letting up, never switching off until he had run his game to earth!"

"Meaning yourself, senor?"

"Meaning myself, of course, Pedro! And then—even while I was indignantly denying the foul charge—while I was painting black a pure snow-white—Rosalind came to the front and kicked all the fat into the fire!"

"My lady? She did—it is not so clear, senor, else my poor wits have gone widely astray!" muttered the Mexican, perplexedly.

"It was still harder for me to comprehend, at first, Morales," said the White Hood Chief with a vicious laugh that contained precious little true mirth. "I had looked upon the fair Rosalind as an angel on earth for so many blind months, you see!"

"Senor!"

"Never you mind, Morales; I'm not sparing myself, then why should I spare my lady? Surely she did not spare me—then! For she not only pointed out the place where my plunder was hidden to the officers who arrested me, but swore she saw me return that night with bloody hands!"

CHAPTER XX.

"KILL HER LEGAL HUSBAND, FIRST!"

WITH savage rancor those words were pronounced, and Captain Cowl, for the first time seeming to lose his self-control, swung his tightly-clinched fist violently, curses hissing through his teeth the while.

Pedro Morales said nothing, drawing a little apart and covertly putting himself more thoroughly on guard, for he could not tell at what moment that rage might shift its dangerous current in his direction.

But that was, not to be the manner in which that strange interview was fated to end, and, rallying his composure as swiftly as he had lost it, Captain Cowl resumed his narrative of past events, once more speaking in an oddly indifferent tone for one who was telling of black crimes more nearly concerning himself than any one else.

"I could only submit, you see, Morales, since I had already surrendered, and was without arms, knowing how securely my boodle was hidden. And then—I was hustled off to prison.

"The grand jury was already in session, as fate would have it, so there was precious scant delay in getting down to solid business.

"Doctor Rutherford seemed able to move heaven and earth in his efforts to avenge the killing of his relative, and so—but why draw it out longer?

"The grand jury returned 'a true bill,' the court appointed a young fledgling of the law as my counsel, since I had no means to hire better, and my case was rushed through at railroad speed.

"As I said before, this Waldene Rutherford took a leading part in my arrest, my trial and my conviction. From start to finish he proved himself a regular bloodhound, and I'm free to own that he alone, without any assistance, would almost surely have run me to earth, carefully as I fancied I had covered over my red trail."

"And my lady, senor?"

"Naturally that interests you most deeply, Don Pedro," retorted the White Hood Chief, once more genial and fair-tempered, in outward seeming at least. "Well, my counsel was not entirely a fool, and so he had her evidence barred from the record, since she was my lawful wife."

"That is the law, then, senor?"

"Of course, Pedro. But, what did it avail? Her story spread like wildfire, thanks to the papers which caught it up so greedily; or, as I've always believed, through the devilish cunning of Waldene Rutherford, who had sworn to hound me to the very gallows!"

"Yet you are still living, senor. And he is—where?"

"I am still living, 'tis true. And he is—patience yet a little longer, my friend! Be sure I am not wasting time or breath. There is solid good reason for each and every sentence I give you, now!"

"I will wait, senor. The night is yet young."

"And your reward for waiting in patience, Pedro, shall be rich—so powerful rich that I'm not quite certain you're fully deserving of it all!"

Captain Cowl broke off with a mocking laugh, which by no means tended to increase the comfort of his single auditor. But the Mexican said nothing, patiently biding his time.

"Even with the testimony which my lady stood fully ready, if not actually eager, to give, barred out of court, there was ample additional evidence gathered against me, and in a marvelously brief space of time, considering that a man's life was at stake, the case was given to the jury and they retired to find a verdict.

"That withdrawal was merely a matter of form, for their minds were already made up to convict; and, less than an hour later I stood up to hear that verdict—guilty of murder in the first degree!"

"Yet you are still living, senor!" murmured the Mexican.

Captain Cowl laughed harshly, then retorted:

"Living here, as you see, Pedro Morales, yet I'm marked as dead on the records of the court in which I received my verdict! And how happened it, do you ask? Listen, my noble lover!

"After the jury were polled and each declared that the verdict read by the foreman was theirs, the honorable judge stated that, for good and sufficient reasons he would postpone pronouncing sentence, and committed me to the care of my guards.

"There was an ugly crowd collected, nearly all breathing fire and total annihilation to the vile assassin; but, what of it? Just then I had room for only one thought: how could I die without first wreaking a bloody vengeance upon those two: my lady and Waldene Rutherford?

"So wholly did these feelings busy my mind that I hardly knew how or why the officers hurried me under cover, through a dark passage to the rear of the court building, then out at a narrow door, where we had completely dodged that snarling, growling, bloodthirsty mob!

"Then—like a flash it all came back to me, and I snatched a revolver from where it hung against the hip of one of my guards, sending a bullet straight through his heart, breaking away from the others in their dismay, firing over my shoulder as I bade my dear heels save my precious neck!

"I dropped another officer, crippled for life, and stung a third so keenly that he howled like a whipped cur! But, like a pack of hungry wolves the mob was hot upon my track, whooping and yelling, shooting and hurling stones, trying all they knew to anticipate the hangman at his job!"

"But you escaped, senor, since you are here, alive?"

"I made for the river, and plunged into it as my last hope of escape from all those howling devils! As my head showed again, bullets began to spit viciously all around me!

"Again and again I dived, each coming up being greeted by a shower of lead, while I could see that other fellows were running along the shore to procure a boat in which to give me chase.

"At last, two bullets struck me, and flinging up my arms I gave a choking yell of pain and horror—then sunk below the surface, forever!"

Captain Cowl ceased, his voice grown hoarse, his face looking damp in the clear light of the rising moon. His hand seemed to tremble as it lifted to dry that rarely-exposed visage.

Drawing another long breath the White Hood Chief continued:

"I was hard hit, but not hurt so bad but what I kept all my wits about me. I saw a little patch of foam and bits of bark, bound together by a tangle of grapevines and fine brush, floating along only a few yards from where I was when those bullets struck me.

"I went down clumsily, like a dying

wretch, turned while under the surface and swam for that little patch of drift. Good luck befriended me, and I came up directly under the center of it!

"Never mind the rest, Morales! I escaped, though the river was patrolled for hours after my vanishment. I escaped, and ere many weeks my wounds had healed, and I was sound as ever, despite the fact that my death had been reported by the officers, and my name now stands on the law-books as 'killed while attempting escape!'"

"'Twas like a miracle, senor!"

"Wait, Pedro, and hear the rest, then you may well say that! Two weeks after I was found guilty in open court, my body was picked up by a couple of fishermen, miles below the point where I had met my death! It was so placed on record, after a coroner and his jury, aided by Doctor Waldene Rutherford, had fully identified the corpse as all that remained to a cheated justice of the condemned assassin, Albert Illingsworth!"

"It sounds strange, senor—very strange to me, this tale!"

"And due notice of my death was carried to my wife by—Doctor Waldene Rutherford! And, as any beauty-loving man naturally would, you comprehend? he fell to consoling my lady for the awful shadow which had fallen over her fair young life!"

"And then, senor?" huskily demanded the Mexican, leaning forward, his face pale in the moonlight, his bronzed hands tightly clinched. "Why tell me all this? What has this strange senor to do with— Eh?"

"Listen and learn, my gallant lover! The legally dead husband gone, why not? And so, this bloodhound physician from sympathizing began to console; from consolation glided into courting, and then—the man who savagely hounded Albert Illingsworth, the husband, to his death, wooed and won and wedded Rosalind Illingsworth, the wife, within less than one brief year from the date of that robbery and killing!"

"Wedded her—my lady!" huskily muttered the Mexican, sorely shaken by that unexpected assertion! "Yet, she is here! She has called you her husband, though—blessed saints above! how am I to see a way clear through all this foul and blinding mist!"

"Pah! are you so dull-witted to-night, Pedro Morales? Though dead, was I not living? And had I not taken all those wild chances more to gain a fair opportunity to wreak a bitter vengeance upon my worst enemies than merely through love of my own life, or fear of the scaffold?"

The Mexican gave a start, lifting his hands in a feverish gesture.

"It is so, then, senor? You did not forget? You did not forgive? And you lay low, like the snake in cover, biding your time until— Ha! I begin to see it all, now!"

"Well, I do wonder!" mockingly cried the outlaw chief.

"'Tis thus, senor! You waited until time had lulled all to blissful content, until they had no fear of the black past! Then, like the hungry wolf of the mountains you swooped down upon them! You slaughtered this wretch who had usurped your place! You carried off your—my lady—her and her babe—your child, too, senor?"

Again Colonel Cowl laughed as the excited Mexican came to an awkward pause, evidently feeling that all was not yet so clear as it might be; then he spoke in his clear, cold tones:

"Wait, Pedro Morales. You are progressing too rapidly. The riddle is not so easily read as all that comes to, let me give fair warning. And now—you really love the fair Rosalind, my friend?"

"Better than my life—better far than the world beside!" impetuously vowed the Mexican, his sinewy hands clasping, his uplifted like a worshiper kneeling at the foot of his patron saint.

"And you would not hesitate to marry her, of course, Pedro?"

"If I only might, senor! Ah, that would be a foretaste of heaven! I would wade through blood, senor, if by that I might only win the hope of one day—but I am mad!"

"Why mad, my dear fellow?"

"Is it not the very worst of madness, then? To dream of marrying my angel—my lady—while you, her lawful lord—"

"You forget that the records plainly de-

share that her husband, Albert Illingsworth, is dead—dead and buried and returned to dust!"

Captain Cowl laughed softly as he spoke, but hugely as he seemed to enjoy this affair, seeming to turn it into a farce, poor Morales was suffering acutely; to him it seemed a tragedy!

"Dead? I wish—pardon me, señor! I hardly know the words that come from my lips just now. But—while you are living, what am I?"

There was a brief silence, broken at length by Captain Cowl, who now spoke in graver and more earnest tones than any he had used for some little time:

"There yet remains a chance for you, Pedro Morales. Like all men, I have my price; pay me that price, first, and you shall marry the fair Rosalind—I swear it by all your saints!"

"Your price, señor?" faltered the Mexican. "And that price is—"

"Kill her legal husband, first!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A COLD-BLOODED PROPOSITION.

CLEAR and distinctly though those remarkable words came, Pedro Morales could hardly credit the witness borne by his own ears.

He shrunk visibly from that tall, athletic form, over the face of which that silken veil had once more been dropped, the mingling shade and moonlight lending a weird, almost ghostly expression to it all.

Twice he essayed to speak, and then managed to stammer forth:

"But, señor, that means—that surely means—yourself!"

Captain Cowl laughed shortly, harshly, then made reply by asking a question:

"Even so, Señor Don Pedro Morales, you would not boggle at that? You would slit my throat or explore my heart without a single pang of regret, if thereby you could climb to Paradise?"

A brief hesitation, then the Mexican boldly exclaimed:

"Yes, 'tis truth, señor! I would slay you—I would kill my own twin brother if by no other means I could win my lady! Only—"

"Finish, now you've made so fair a beginning, Pedro."

"'Tis so strange, so marvelous that you should ask for your own eternal discharge from life, señor!"

"'Twould be strange indeed if only true, Pedro," with another and a lighter laugh. "but as I told you before, the riddle is not so easy to read as it looks on the surface. Now—open thy ears, my true hero!"

"Although my lady never knew as much, and could hardly be made to give the fact full credence now, the fact still remains that she was fully and completely divorced, long before she took to her heart and arms that Waldene Rutherford as a second husband!"

"Yet she recognized you as her lawful spouse, Albert Illingsworth!" muttered the bewildered Mexican. "It is dark—it is impossible for me to see the way through, señor! Surely my lady called you her husband?"

"Yes, for she never knew of the divorce," coolly asserted the White Hood Chief. "She never for a moment doubted the truth of the report that her husband had met his death in the mad Missouri. She firmly believed the body brought forward as such was actually that of the doubly-disgraced Albert Illingsworth."

"Why wouldn't she believe it, then?" with another of his low, disagreeable yet not wholly unmusical laughs. "Waldene Rutherford identified the corpse after a careful examination. She herself recognized it, while all the law-hounds—bah! Enough has been said, surely!"

"Then, when time had partially cured the wounds left by that little affair, the gallant doctor won for a blushing bride her who had for so long been his languid yet ever-charming patient; and deeming it best to go far away from the city where so many ugly memories were revived by that romantic wedding, they migrated to the West, finally settling on an extensive stock-farm in Western Nebraska."

"And where was the late lamented husband, all this time, do you ask, my Pedro? Where but waiting, planning, biding his

time until he saw his way clear to killing two birds with one stone!"

"Does that sound so strange in your ears, then, good friend? With one of your hot blood and volcanic temper that patient waiting under cover would have been impossible? You would have given him the knife, her the bullet, eh?"

"What would you, señor? I am a Spanish cavalier!"

"And I am, what I was then, a free-born white, who knows how to hold his hand until his head bids him strike! But, listen yet a little longer, my good Pedro! 'Tis well worth your while, I assure you!"

"Through all those seemingly wasted years I was carefully planning my campaign, preparing everything for dealing a blow which should fall crushingly, be bitterer a thousand-fold than sudden death, yet leave the guilty one alive to suffer on, each day a torture worse than killing!"

"Then, when everything was in readiness, my blow fell!"

"Backed up by an armed force of trusty lads, I swooped down upon the Rutherford Ranch, sweeping all before me! The master was absent, as I right well knew, but the mistress—still fair, still young, even though she was now a mother—was there Pedro!"

"When we left, my lady bore us company, with her baby, then a sunny-haired, prattling little imp; fair enough, only for her thrice-accursed parentage!"

"Behind us remained a carefully-prepared letter, seemingly written by the fair hand of the fairer ranch-mistress! And that was nearly the first object which caught and claimed the attention of Waldene Rutherford when he returned home from 'his business trip."

"That letter! Ah, how many a grand laugh I had while so carefully planning and penning each line! Try to picture it all, Pedro! Try to imagine the so lately happy husband as he—bah! Why should you take the trouble, then? Enough: let me proceed!"

"That daintily penned 'missive was but part of the trap which I had set so cunningly, and Waldene Rutherford had hardly grace given him in which to fairly sip the poisoned draught, before my White-hooded ads pounced upon him, overpowering, binding, gagging, then bearing their victim away from the ranch-house to a handy little timber island, where he was stripped to the buff, bound to a trunk, then flogged until his back resembled a red-lined map of war, and his trembling feet rested in twin pools of his own blood!"

Captain Cowl ceased speaking, his voice falling him for the moment, more through savage joy at that past revenge than aught else.

Pedro Morales gave a low ejaculation, his face plainly betraying his thoughts, thanks to the wonderfully clear moonlight.

He was beginning to see through the puzzling mists now, but the White Hood Chief flung up a hand to check his tongue, and the Mexican subsided for the time being.

"Wait, Pedro Morales; I mean to make a clean breast of it all, now I have begun, so spare your questions."

"My gallant lads had their orders, and right thoroughly they carried them out, from start to finish. I have only told you part of what this medical bloodhound had to suffer, but enough!"

"'Twas no part of my scheme to take away his life, remember. Death would be all too poor a vengeance for me! And so, bearing in mind my stern caution on that point, the White-hoods left the fellow with life, if not with consciousness!"

"But it seems that Waldene Rutherford was made of less stern metal than I had fair reason to believe. True, he did not perish under the lash, as a weaker man might have done. He even survived the knowledge—for such it surely seemed to him—that the woman he adored had never really loved him, but, after enduring her second batch of matrimonial chains in seeming happiness and content for those few years, had now 'left with a handsomer man,' taking with them the precious little Pearl who reigned as second queen in Rutherford's heart!"

"He lived through all this; I am telling you, Pedro, but his mind was less hardy, and Waldene Rutherford went insane."

"And is now called Crazy Jack, señor?" ventured the Mexican, unable longer to hold his tongue in check. "He is this blood-thirsty demon, the Mad Detective, captain?"

"You are right, Pedro; Waldene Rutherford is now Crazy Jack, the Mad Detective, with only a single clear idea left in his addled brain: that of wreaking bitter vengeance for the black past!"

"Although they wore masks while capturing and flogging the fellow, it really looks as though he managed to take mental photographs of them one and all! If not, why is he so deadly certain in selecting his victims? How else can you account for his never making a mistake?"

"Is it not through a compact with Satan, señor?" hesitatingly asked the superstitious Mexican, covertly crossing himself as he spoke.

"Whether he is in league with Satan or not, the fact remains that Crazy Jack is playing the devil with those who White-capped him!" said Captain Cowl, with a short, harsh laugh that held more venom than a curse could convey. "Already he has lessened their number by seven, and yet the reports are not all in!"

"Then—is it not time to send forth his own death-warrant, my captain?" almost timidly ventured the Mexican.

The chief made a fiercely-impatient gesture, as he added:

"I hoped even against common sense that Waldene Rutherford might recover his shattered wits, and so enable me to pile fresh agony upon the torments he must be experiencing even while insane," moodily muttered the pitiless villain, seemingly more to himself than by way of explanation to his present companion.

"Through all these long years I have bided my time with what patience I could summon, cheating myself with the fond belief that my rich reward would ultimately come; but now—listen, Pedro Morales!"

"At your service, señor."

There ensued a brief pause, during which the Hooded Chief seemed quieting his diabolical passions, and arranging the words he wished to convey his final proposal to the love-lorn Mexican.

"Pedro Morales, you now know all that I care to tell you concerning the past, and why for all these years I have kept my real identity concealed from my lady, even as I kept my face a complete mystery to her eyes. Until—Thanks to you, Pedro!"

"Señor!" deprecatingly murmured the Mexican.

"Never mind; I'm really glad the cat is out of the bag! And now, let me make it perfectly clear to you, Pedro, so you can give me your answer with open eyes and unclouded wits."

"This Crazy Jack, the Mad Detective, is none other than Waldene Rutherford, he who hounded Albert Illingsworth to the gallows's-foot, he who wooed and won the fair Rosalind, and who is yet her legal husband!"

"Kill him; show me his severed head as proof; and I'll give you my lady, together with ample proof that I no longer have any legal claim upon her as a husband! Will you accept my offer, Pedro Morales?"

"Yes! I swear to fetch you that sorry head, señor, by all the saints!" cried the Mexican, reaching out both hands in his eagerness to close the horrible compact!

CHAPTER XXII.

"FAINT HEART NE'ER WON FAIR LADY!"

OTTO BRANDAGEE rose to take his departure, flushing a bit at the coldly contemptuous dismissal given him by Colonel Lawrence Beaumont.

As he reached the door, the fellow paused to utter.

"Accept my thanks for all your generous hospitality is worth, colonel! And, as every man surely has a legal as well as moral right to defend himself, if that infernal Crazy Jack should come prowling around in search of me, I'll shoot him on sight!"

"And I'll hang you higher than Haman if you even make the attempt, sir!" sternly thundered the old soldier.

Otto Brandagee made his escape without further words, and sinking back into his chair the veteran fell into a long and far from joyous reverie.

More than an hour was spent after this unusual fashion for him, but at the end of that period a low tapping sounded at his closed door, and at his command to open, Jefferson Lee Beaumont was revealed.

"Come in, my son!" cried the colonel, with more than usual animation. "I was just on the point of sending for you, Jeff!"

Entering and closing the door, the young man sunk into the chair recently occupied by Otto Brandagee.

"About this infernal Yankee, father—" he began.

"Wait, son!" with a checking gesture. "Even though that fellow prove to be all you fancy, there's still more trouble afoot than he can possibly stir up!"

"What? You mean the fellow Crazy Jack chased here, sir?"

"The notice comes through him, yes," answered the colonel, his brows contracting and his eyes gaining a keener glow as he produced that enigmatical sentence so carefully penned, and submitted it to the hands of his son and heir.

While Jefferson Lee was looking at this in only partial understanding, Colonel Beaumont tersely told what additional warning the writer of that brief greeting had sent by word of mouth, then adding:

"I was sorely tempted to meet this unexpected complication alone, and after my own fashion, son, but you have quite as powerful an interest at stake as I."

"If Blanche would only admit as much, sir!"

Colonel Beaumont made an impatient gesture at this surly muttering, while his son hastily added:

"Why not make flat denial of it all, sir? Surely, after so many years have passed by, a claim like this can be successfully denied?"

A flush as of deepening anger crept into the elder man's face as Jefferson Lee spoke thus.

"So I might have made the denial, sir, and with a fair show of reason on my side, only for your folly!" he retorted.

"Sir?"

"Is that not the naked truth, boy? Didn't you force me to tell Blanche she was not my daughter, by law? Have you forgotten, so soon?"

Young Beaumont lowered his eyes, teeth closing viciously on his red lip before he muttered his defense:

"Why did I ask that favor of you, sir? Shall I repeat it, then? Because the scales had fallen from over my eyes, and I at last realized that I loved Blanche, not as a sister, but as a man loves the woman whom he wishes to make his bride!"

Young Beaumont spoke with ardor sufficient to satisfy the most captious; it would seem; his face flushed warmly, his black eyes gleaming vividly the while.

But his father's lip curled in scorn.

"Words, words, nothing but empty words where a man would long since have taken decisive action!" he ejaculated.

"Have I not sought to take action, as you term it, sir?"

"Have you, indeed?" with an open sneer. "And the girl, then?"

Those dark eyes fell, and a surly curse came through those white teeth as they clicked sharply together.

"Only for that infernal Leo Crawford!"

Those white mustaches curled with fierce scorn, and with his eyes filled with even more than the fires of youth, Colonel Beaumont leaned across the table between them, speaking in clear, stern tones:

"Why spend your breath in idle curses against one absent, Jefferson Lee? Pahl! had I stood in your place—had I been the young and hot-blooded lover instead of the old and decrepit father—I would have met this Leo Crawford face to face, breast to breast, and forced him to a fight to the death, long ago!"

The son flinched visibly before that fiery speech, looking more like a craven than a worthy son of this fierce sire; but even as he recoiled he muttered through his clinched teeth:

"It's all easy enough to growl at me now, sir, but when I tried to act, didn't you hold me back?"

"When you started to set the cowboys on

his back—yes! Did I ever check you for seeking vengeance like a true man, boy?"

There was no answer ready for this fierce question, and, after a brief pause, during which he was plainly fighting back his own hot temper, Colonel Beaumont spoke again:

"As I thought of saying, Jefferson, had you taken such action as a man so deeply in love would surely have taken, there could have come no such trouble as now menaces us. With Blanche your wedded wife, and this Crawford fully disposed of—but why talk of what should have been?"

"I'll even up with Crawford if he dares come skulking around here, rest assured of that, sir!" surlily growled the younger Beaumont.

"Settle with him like a gentleman, then, and as the son of a soldier would naturally be expected to settle," sharply cut in the colonel, then flinging forth a hand like one brushing aside a minor annoyance:

"But it's not this shystering lawyer we have to consider just now, Jefferson."

"The ugly fact remains that Blanche is growing inclined to have her own way in pretty much everything, of late days!"

"Why don't you put the curb on, sir?"

"And thus insure the belt in good earnest? No, no, my lad! What we fail to win through coaxing and humoring, can never be gained through harsher methods. And this is the real point at issue now."

"Blanche has been told that she is merely an adopted daughter, and if this man comes, with full proofs that he is the same person who left the little girl in my charge—what then?"

"Hold fast to her, sir! You have legally adopted Blanche, and no man living can take her away against our will!"

"What if she takes a notion to decide for herself, son? What if the foolish child concludes to go with him, of her own free will?"

Jefferson made a fierce gesture, then muttered:

"That shall never be, sir! I'll kill the fellow, first!"

"What if he can prove that he is her own father, though?" persisted the colonel, his face turning paler, and something of a shifty light entering his eyes at that sanguinary threat.

The son cast a swift glance over his shoulder toward the closed door, then at the shuttered window. He seemed afraid lest prying eyes or listening ears were strained to catch those dangerous words; but then, leaning over the table he whispered:

"What would that fact matter, so long as she never stumbles upon the truth, sir? Once past telling—"

He cut his whisper short in obedience to a quick gesture made by his father, whose face was averted now, a slight shiver running over his still stalwart figure.

"That would be the coward's remedy, Jefferson, and I could never look an honest man in the face again if I once fell so disgustingly low as all that comes to!"

"Then—what else, sir? Surely you will not meekly yield up—I'll fight ever you, sir, before thus losing all hope of making Blanche my wife, sir!"

This seemed a flash of genuine spirit, and the old soldier smiled in grim approval as he met that fiery look.

"That's heartily spoken, my son, and if you had always shown as good spirit—But let the disagreeables go, for now!"

"One question, Jefferson; are you willing to marry Blanche without aught of the customary frills and flourishes?"

"Show me how I can do that, sir, and let my actions answer!"

"It seems to me that even more difficult matters have been arranged than this, boy," with a low, short chuckle, then adding: "And with all my pondering, all my seeking for a surer, safer, easier path out of the woods, this is the very best idea that has come to me!"

"What idea, sir? Let me know my share, and I'll carry it out without making hitch or balk—depend upon that!"

"Go tell Blanche of your mad adoration, and stick to the chase until you have gained her admission of love. Then, Parson Dolliver is handy! I've recently learned that he is paying a visit to Morgan, at the Black Jack Ranch!"

There was a thinly-veiled meaning under-

lying this information which brought a warm flush into the dark face of the younger Beaumont, but after a short hesitation, the son muttered:

"That sounds mighty nice, sir, and all that; but, what if Blanche shuts me up again, as she has so often done? What if she flatly refuse even to listen to my suit?"

Colonel Beaumont sprung from his chair with eyes flaming and face hot with rage mingled with scorn as he harshly exploded:

"Only that your dead mother was a saint through her life, boy, I'd never believe you a son of mine! If she refuse, you ask? Bah! shall I go court the girl for you, faint-heart?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

ONE METHOD OF WOOING.

WHILE this interview between father and son was going on below-stairs, Blanche was in her room above, even more deeply interested in a note which contained a vast deal in a limited space of paper.

Not until she had safely won that maidenly retreat had she dared venture to open and investigate the tiny roll of paper so deftly passed to her hand from his by the Yankee tramp.

Then she saw, what instinct had already told her; it was a brief message from the man she had learned to love so passionately, Leo Crawford, the young lawyer from San Antonio.

Now, for the dozenth time, her glistening eyes were devouring those few precious lines, and this is what she saw:

"MY DARLING:—"

"Trust him who hands you this, as you would trust me. Whatever character he may think best to assume, he is glorious old Dick Ready, my brother-in-heart, true as steel and faithful as shrewd! I have given him my fullest confidence, dearest, and you must not mind doing the same."

"Please arrange some plan of meeting with Dick, dearest. Or, what would suit my mood much better, bid me come like a man under the broad daylight, to claim my bride! Which shall it be, darling?"

"YOUR LEO C."

Over and over the maiden read these closely written lines, now blushing divinely, then growing paler with fears as to the outcome should her gallant lover really attempt to "beard the Douglass in his hall!"

There were thoughts of the quaintly triggered out messenger who had so adroitly delivered that message, just in time to foil those rudely searching hands; and while it dyed her fair cheeks a shade darker to think that her love-secret was in his keeping, she could not help feeling that, after all, such an aid and ally would be marvelously valuable.

What answer should she send back to Leo? Where was he now? Surely, he would not venture near Lazy B Ranch while—

So deeply buried was the maiden in these thoughts that she heard not the swift, light tread of human feet on the stairs or while drawing nearer her door; but before she could deny admission to the person who rapped, the knob turned, the door swung open, and Jefferson Lee Beaumont entered the chamber!

"Don't! 'tis only I, Blanche!" he spoke, hastily, as the maiden sprung to her feet with a low cry, as of a fright.

"What is it—why are you here, then?"

The young man closed the door behind him, giving his rather long locks a slight toss as he faced the maiden in that deepening twilight.

"Now don't show your claws please, Blanche," was his hardly solicitous opening as he stepped a little nearer, swinging a chair around until its seat lent support to a bent knee, while his arms crossed upon the slowly swaying back.

"You know how best to escape such an infliction, sir," sharply retorted the maiden. "Shall I show you the way, Jefferson?"

"Show me something better than this unjust scorn, Blanche, can't you, girl? If you only knew what fresh trouble is now hanging over your head, I really reckon you would be a little more kind!"

There was no reply ready for this observation. Her flushed cheeks paled, and only the gathering gloom which follows sunset concealed the uneasy, half-frightened look in her great eyes.

What could he mean? Surely the truth had not been so soon discovered? Surely this messenger from Leo Crawford—

"Because it is trouble, Blanche, no matter how hard we try to bluff it off," added young Beaumont, placing his own construction upon that start and show of agitation. "Now—can you even give a guess as to what business brought that Otto Brandagee—the fellow Crazy Jack chased—here?"

The maiden caught her breath sharply, yet with intense relief. What mattered it to her, so long as Jefferson Lee had not hit off that one really dangerous scent?

Again did the young man cheat himself, and his swarthy face lightened up still further. Surely all was working his way, and even yet he would prove to the stern old soldier that the son could at least equal the father, sneers or no sneers!

It was not such an easy task to control her voice, after receiving such a shock, followed so closely by such intense relief; but the maiden feared lest her unwelcome caller should begin to suspect something of the truth should she maintain silence longer.

"That person? Ugh!" with a little shiver and gesture of unfeigned aversion. "Surely no good can come from such a source, Jefferson!"

"Well you are a witch, Blanche! And you—what think you really brought that fellow here, then?"

"Fear of his life, wasn't it? Yet, of the two, I'd far rather trust myself with that poor crazy man! If mad, he is not a—ugh!"

Jefferson Lee laughed right merrily, more than content with the turn matters were taking, just then.

"Well, dear, father sent me up to break the news to you, and so—that fellow brought him a message from—from the stranger who placed you in father's care, so many years ago!"

Blanche gave a start and a half-smothered ejaculation at this statement, for her brain had been by far too busy with other matters to give thought to this subject.

"From—whom do you mean, Jefferson?"

"From the man who brought you to father and mother, when you were only a baby—anyway, you couldn't have been more than three or four years old," he made clumsy amendment.

Even that obscure light failed to mask the unusual pallor which had taken possession of that fair face, and the maiden stood rigidly erect, like one who was undergoing a severe strain.

"And that man—why are you so slow of speech Jeff?"

"That man sends word to father by this messenger that he is coming back here to reclaim his property: his property, mind you, Blanche! For that is what his words mean, even though he may not have selected just those words!"

"His property?" echoed the maiden, huskily.

"And that property is—yourself, Blanche!"

The maiden caught her breath sharply at that blunt, almost brutal sentence, but apart from that all was silence for the space of half a minute. Then Blanche spoke, slowly, like one who finds it difficult to put her meaning into words:

"Who is this man? By what show of right can he term me his—his property?"

"He claims to be your father, Blanche, but—"

"My father? And send so brutal a message as that?" and a hot wave of indignation brought the rich color back to her face once more.

"If he was no worse than merely rude or insolent, Blanche," added young Beaumont, ruthlessly pressing his point home. "But, like man, like master, I'm sorely afraid! And, what was it Crazy Jack called that messenger, dearest?"

The maiden shrunk away, bowing her head and covering face with joined hands. She was shivering visibly, and plainly suffering through this totally unsuspected revelation; but, instead of feeling aught of pity, the young man smiled maliciously as he gazed

upon that bowed figure for a brief space in silence.

He had made his attack on the impulse of the moment, and while himself keenly stung by the scorn which his soldier-father had expressed; but he had not dreamed of such brilliant success as this!

Now if ever he must carry the day! Now if ever his victory must be made sure!

Letting the chair seek its own level with a thump which caused the maiden to start afresh and to turn his way, Jefferson Lee reached out both hands as though yearning to clasp that loved one to his manly bosom, speaking rapidly, yet with all the pathos he could summon on the spur of the moment.

"My poor, bruised, moaning dove! Let me comfort you, Blanche! You already know how madly I love you! You know that I would die ten thousand deaths just to save you from suffering one tiny pang! And so—I love you with all my soul, darling!"

Blanche gave a low exclamation, shrinking back as he took a step forward with hands still extended.

"I love you, precious! Then—give me the legal right to defend you against all such vile claims, Blanche! Say that you will marry me—now, at once!"

Another step in advance, then Blanche gave a faint cry, at the same time striking aside the hands which were about to close upon her person.

That was hardly a reception to be gloried over; but still bearing in mind the stern reproaches of his sterner parent, Jefferson Lee would not take even so plain a hint.

"It is that, or far worse, my darling! Your father can force you to leave us and bear him company, now; but then, as my wife—"

"Have you gone crazy, Jefferson Beaumont?" sharply demanded the maiden, once again foiling his efforts to win actual possession.

"Don't—Listen to me, dearest! Surely you can see that this is your only sure hope of escaping that devil? If you will only—Parson Dolliver is over at the Black Jack Ranch, and I'll rush him over here to marry us if you only consent to his—"

"I'd rather have him read my funeral sermon, you idiot!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

NATHAN WINTERGREEN HAS BETTER LUCK.

THERE surely was no room left for doubting her full meaning, now!

Sharp and indignant came the words, ending with an epithet which caused the young man's cheeks to burn and his ears to fairly tingle.

All his hopes of success fell in one clumsy heap; and, smarting with anger, he lost control of himself, harshly retorting:

"Still thinking of that shyster lawyer, are you, eh? He's hunted his hole, like any other cowardly coyote, but if he ever shows his dirty mug around here again, I'll strip his mangy hide and hang it on the fence!"

Swift as thought a small but stinging hand fell across his lips, though too late to check his brutal speech.

"You cur!" cried the maiden as she dealt the richly-merited blow. "You would no more dare face Leo Crawford than you would—Go! Leave my room, sir! Or—shall I call a servant with the broom to sweep away all trash?"

Elegant? Well, perhaps not, but at least her speech held one merit: there was no possibility for mistaking her meaning, and an even greater idiot than Jefferson Beaumont could have seen she meant all that passed her lips, too.

Blanche even pushed him toward the door through which he had won admission to her presence, and with the "wind entirely taken out of his sails," Jefferson Lee beat a retreat, muttering dire vengeance for such a shameful reception of his generous offer!

"The time may come when you'll feel like pleading to me, my lady!"

"Death will come before that, Mr. Beaumont!" retorted the maiden as she slammed the door so hard upon his heels that he sprang clear to the stair-landing, with a grunt of angry alarm.

Blanche quickly turned key in lock, then went back to the easy-chair in which she had been sitting when startled from thought by the unwelcome intrusion.

Sinking down into those softly cushioned depths, she once more read that note, then fell into a curiously mixed reverie.

That note told her her true love was in waiting, not far away, only too eager to run any and all risks for the chance of winning her hand as he had long since captured her heart.

His messenger and confidant was below-stairs, doubtless even then expecting word or signal from her!

Blanche knew that life without Leo Crawford would be worse than a hopeless blank, and yet—what ought she to do?

Only too clearly did she realize that there was nothing to be hoped for from an appeal to Colonel Beaumont, so long as she scorned the love-suit of his hopeful heir. At best she could only look for cold and chilling courtesy from that stern old soldier; and that only while she took no more decided steps.

Then—this mysterious stranger whose messenger had so narrowly escaped the vengeance of the Mad Detective; what of him?

"Was Jeff lying?" she mused, perplexedly, her great eyes staring at vacancy the while. "Did he think to frighten me into accepting—Pah! the odious little ape!"

Had he been there to see and to hear, however angry those words, tone and look might have made him, young Beaumont would never again have cheated himself with such a baseless hope. Blanche would indeed take death as a bridegroom in preference to Jefferson Lee!

Dismissing "the little ape" with that brief epitaph, Blanche let her thoughts return again to the mysterious personage who had left her, a little child, hardly able to talk distinctly, in the care of those who had, for years, loved and cherished her as their own daughter.

Who was he, this unknown? Why had he abandoned his child so strangely? Why had he never come back to see her, to learn how she was getting along? And, since he had kept silence for so long, why break it now?

From one point of difficulty to another flashed her troubled reflections, and yet Blanche was as far as ever from deciding just how she ought to answer that loving message from Leo Crawford.

The twilight had long since deepened into early night, but she made no response to the supper-bell. Surely she had food for thought sufficient to keep her body from going hungry!

Then, soft and mellow, yet striking distinctly up to her opened window, came a bar or two of a tune which she recognized as a favorite with Leo Crawford; and, fairly holding her breath as she listened, Blanche an instant later caught a guarded cough, coming from directly beneath her casement!

The truth flashed upon her, and springing swiftly to the window, she leaned forth, catching an indistinct glimpse of a tall shape partly hidden there beside the tall rose-bush.

"Is there no word, Miss Blanche?" was softly asked, and the maiden at once recognized the voice of Nathan Wintergreen, although his nasal twang had vanished, and his accent was missing.

"Sh h h!" she breathed, agitatedly. "If they should hear you now! You ought not to risk—"

"Beg pardon, but I couldn't well come inside, and so—can I have a word with you, Miss Blanche?"

"If you really think—"

"L. C. is waiting, remember, Miss Blanche?"

"Then—yes! Go over to yonder motte—see!" reaching out a fair hand to indicate the cover more clearly. "Go there, and wait for me. I'll try—not to detain you very long, sir!"

"I'll wait, if it's until sunrise, Miss Blanche," said the disguised messenger, turning and gliding silently away.

Panting, almost breathless, her brain in a dizzy whirl through conflicting emotions, Blanche drew back from the window, fairly frightened by what she had done.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE MAD DETECTIVE'S CLUTCHES.

And yet, what other course was left open for her to follow? She had nothing to hope for from Colonel Beaumont, and still less from his son. And, too, that mysterious claimant!

All these arguments flashed through her mind during those first few moments, but the most potent argument of all was never touched: her intense love for Leo Crawford, whose representative she had just promised to meet in secret!

Still, with everything to urge her onward, the maiden found it no easy task to take the first positive step, and even after she had changed her light-hued dress for a dark and limp robe, with a black lace mantle covering her fair hair, she hesitated, trembling in every fiber.

As she stood by her partly opened door, she caught the sound of voices below-stairs, and listening, knew that the Beaumonts, father and son, had left the dining-room to pass through the wide hall into the colonel's private quarters.

She heard the door close behind them, and as the evening was warm, she knew from this that the two men were about to indulge in a private confab: about her rejection of Jefferson, and its fitting punishment?

That thought stung the maiden and lent her the requisite courage to take the first and decisive step. She passed noiselessly from her chamber, down the stairs and out at the front door which had been left standing open.

Neither sound nor voice came to check her progress, and swiftly passing around to the side of the building, Blanche hurried off through the clear starlight toward the timber-island which she had pointed out to Nathan Wintergreen, or Dick Ready, more properly speaking.

If seen by any of those belonging to the Lazy B Ranch, Blanche met with no check, no interruption, and a couple of minutes later had gained the shadows cast by the live oaks, and heard the low, respectful tones of her true love's messenger.

"I thank you, Miss Blanche, for favoring my hopes so speedily," the actor said, respectfully doffing his hat and not presuming to offer his hand in less formal greeting.

"I can't stop long; I really ought not to—"

"I can fully appreciate all you must be feeling, Miss Blanche, but when no other way is left open, surely we ought to be thankful for one like this, even if it is a little lacking in ceremony? And—Leo Crawford is only waiting your gracious permission to make all amends, Miss Blanche!"

"He is—Mr. Crawford is—quite well, sir?" faltered the maiden, blushing warmly even with both lace mantilla and night to shield her face.

"In all save patience," with a low, mellow laugh. "He wanted to come in person, and unless you can fix an appointment with him, right soon, come he will, though a thousand guns barred the way!"

That was enough to banish those maidenly doubts, and Blanche said:

"Oh, sir, he must not come to the house! That would cause bloodshed, and—tell Leo this: I will meet him at this hour, or as nearly this hour as possible, to-morrow night at the Cottonwood Springs."

"He will not fail you, Miss Blanche, be assured of that!"

"He will know the place. We have both been there, often. And—But when will you see him, sir?"

"This very night, since I've won an interview with you. We arranged all that in advance, for time is very precious, and we tried to save all that we could. So—At the Cottonwood Springs?"

"Yes. And—there is one—an old and dearly loved friend, sir, whom—I believe Mr. Crawford has met him, too?"

"And this old friend, ma'am?"

"His name is Rev. Elijah Dolliver, a Methodist minister," hurriedly answered Blanche, blushing anew as she added: "Beg Leo to find him. He is at the Black Jack Ranch. And—if the dear old man should say—"

"That 'twas right and fitting, you'll make Leo happy right there?"

A brief silence, then Blanche turned to her; but back came one word:

"Yes!"

OTTO BRANDAGEE met with only a passive reception by the Lazy B cowboys, and might easily have found himself less welcome only for the natural spice of curiosity with which all mankind are flavored.

Of course that curiosity had to do with Crazy Jack and his reasons for hunting the stranger so hotly; but Brandagee had no intentions of damning himself by confessing the truth, and time was all too short for hatching up a lie plausible enough to blind those keen eyes and even more acute wits.

And so, while supplying food and drink in abundance, the Lazy B adherents rather shunned than sought the company of this unknown, and thus Otto Brandagee had all the more leisure in which to thoroughly digest the grim hint let fall for his especial benefit by the lips of Colonel Lawrence Beaumont.

Although Brandagee had left the encampment of the White Caps prior to the return of Tom Ackerman with his tragic report of the red vengeance of Crazy Jack, the Mad Detective, while nothing on his trip had given him a clue to that latest tragedy, those repeated blows of stern vengeance which had fallen upon his comrades in that midnight raid as White Caps, had not been without due effect upon this rascal.

And now, feeling fairly confident that Crazy Jack would hang about the Lazy B Ranch in hopes of claiming the prey which he had relinquished in obedience to Blanche Beaumont, Brandagee thought the matter out and came to the final conclusion that he would indeed be wise to act upon the hint given him by Colonel Beaumont.

And so it came to pass that, even while the maiden was stealing to keep the rendezvous she had given Nathan Wintergreen, the messenger from the mysterious unknown who claimed to be her father, was somewhat similarly engaged: only he was hoping to escape an interview, rather than form part in one such!

There was nothing to hinder. Colonel Beaumont had let it be understood that the stranger was free to stay or to depart as he saw fit; and no man employed on the Lazy B Ranch was to lift hand or word in help or hindrance.

When night had fairly fallen, and before the moon had risen high enough to add its clear light to the perils which surely beset his path, Otto Brandagee took his first step, cautiously leading his fully-equipped mustang out of the stable to which it had been assigned, and after a wary glance around, moving stealthily away from the quarters.

Now and then the fellow paused with bated breath, but 'twas merely some ordinary sound of the night, common enough on a populous ranch, and naught which betokened him evil.

In spite of the grim assurance given him by the colonel, Brandagee, himself an arrant liar and trickster, could not convince himself that free passage would be granted him, if his retreat was detected; and so it came to pass that he wasted many precious minutes in his wholly unnecessary precautions, so far as the people of the ranch were concerned.

Finally he passed what he deemed the danger-line, and springing from ground to saddle, he gave a low, grim chuckle of exultation.

"Cheated, ye sanctimonious hound!" he muttered, shaking a clinched hand back at the ranch-buildings. "Red Otto's a free man once more, and when he pays another visit—red cock will crow, and redder blood will flow!"

Laughing to himself at this, the knave sent his good steed ahead at a leisurely trot, hardly yet daring to break into the more noisy gallop, yet already feeling that he had drawn his neck fairly out of the noose which he had fancied closing about it.

And now, too, a born horseman, he felt far less dread of the Mad Detective, although he kept his keen eyes roving around, in all directions to guard against a possible surprise. But, all those precautions were taken in vain.

Just when he felt the safest, and had left the Beaumont residence far out of eye-range, the blow fell!

Without sound or warning it came: up from the lush grass growing in that gentle swale flew a human arm, and, invisible by the starlight, a snaky coil extended itself, the loop of a lasso closing fairly over the head and shoulders of the rider before he had the faintest intimation of what was coming.

Then, with a vigorous jerk, adding thereto the whole weight of his body as he flung himself backward, Crazy Jack plucked his prey out of the saddle, laughing shrilly as the luckless wretch came to earth with a terrible shock!

The next few minutes were forever lost to Otto Brandagee, but when a glimmer of sense returned to him, he found himself lying face downward across the withers of a galloping horse, a fierce clutch fastened upon his neck, while on the opposite side of the horse a human leg was thrown over and twined closely about his lower limbs, thus fastening him most effectively, and preventing him from making even a feeble fight for freedom.

Before he had fairly rallied from the shock of his heavy fall, Brandagee was rudely dumped from horse to earth, and, leaping after, Crazy Jack fastened a pitiless grip upon his arm, dragging him bodily to one of the trees forming that timber-island, swiftly binding him to its trunk with the same lasso which had first effected his capture.

Paying not the slightest attention to the cries and prayers for mercy which came from his prisoner, the Mad Detective raked together material for a fire, then struck a match and soon had a red light rendering all surrounding objects visible.

Pausing directly in front of his helpless victim, Waldene Rutherford clapped hands to hips, sweeping eyes over that bound form, laughing softly at first, then with more of insanity's fire.

Again and again did Otto Brandagee plead for pity, but never once were his prayers heeded; so far as outward seeming went, not a syllable was heard by that laughing lunatic.

Then, with a sudden change of mood, Crazy Jack flung aloft his hands, turning face upward as though in quest of his winged allies, to hoarsely shout:

"Ho! ho! ye buzzards! Come, ye vultures! Flock to the feast, ye hungry growlers of mountain and canyon! Come—come—come! There is enough for all! There is food for both, gore for all!"

There was something so horrible, so awe-inspiring in this mad exordium that Brandagee lost what scanty remnant of courage that roping had left him, and now broke forth in cries and sobs and inarticulate prayers for pity, for mercy; but if he finally succeeded in attracting the notice of the Mad Detective, he by no means bettered his situation.

Crazy Jack stared at him for a brief space as though unable to determine just what manner of creature he might be, brushing a hand repeatedly across his temples, slowly shaking his head, muttering the while:

"Who is it? What does it mean, here so like—Ha! The rope—the lashes—the cruel knife! Devils from hell! Off—off, I say!"

Crazy Jack seemed plunged into the midst of a furious fight for dear life against long odds, striking and kicking, wrestling and tripping, gasping the trees hard by with his flashing knife, more than once barely escaping a collision with the horrified wretch who was past helping himself, yet who suffered all the tortures of death in each one of those terrible minutes.

Then came another change, and Crazy Jack put up his weapons, dashing the sweat from his fevered brows, stooping lower as he almost imperceptibly crept nearer his bound captive, eyes glittering like those of a serpent, teeth showing through his ragged mustache, sinewy fingers working like talons as they reached out in advance.

"A devil! See the red brand across his forehead—the mark of Cain! Ah, hal ye thought to deceive the one who never sleeps, did ye, imp of the blazing brand? Ye reckoned on crawling from den to hole without meeting the master's heel, did ye, snake of Satan?"

"Don't—I never—Help!"

Vainly Otto Brandagee strove to slink aloud in the scant hope of bringing aid, but his throat was so parched by fear, his vocal

organs so sorely unstrung, that only a hoarse, barely articulate gurgle passed his lips, and that sound fell only on heedless ears.

"See the craven cur shriek and shiver!" cried the madman, with a low and blood-curdling laugh as he crept still nearer the helpless prisoner, pointing at Brandagee with one hand, while the other drooped toward the horn-hafted knife at his girdle. "Look at him now, then recall him as he, with those brother devils, pelted one poor, unarmed and helpless creature with rods and lashes, fire and coals, knives and— Ha! Thou art the grinning devil who brought the hive and emptied it into my hollow skull!"

With those fierce words Crazy Jack leaped erect, flashing forth his knife and giving a swift flourish of the gleaming steel so close to the face of his shivering prey that the luckless wretch lowered his lids to shut out the awful vision of coming death.

For a brief space that barbaric dance lasted; then Crazy Jack came to a halt, once more scanning that fear-blinded face like one who has not yet fully determined its identity.

"A devil, surely!" he muttered to himself. "One of those pitiless imps of Satan who— But, which one? He of the flaming brands? He who directed the lashes? Or— Speak, ye devil!" abruptly lifting his voice and at the same time reaching forth his unarmed hand to rudely pluck open those closed lids.

"Don't— I never— Before Heaven I didn't do it, sir!" groaned the terrified wretch; but, speech only harmed in place of helping him.

"Ha! now I recognize ye, devil!" fairly yelled Crazy Jack, one hand buried in hair, the other swiftly circling head with bare blade!

CHAPTER XXVI.

TELLING THE TRUTH BY ACCIDENT.

A WILD shriek burst from the lips of the tortured man, for never did red Indian go through the preliminary motions of scalping a victim with more horrid reality than Crazy Jack, just then.

But, it was the back of his blade that swept around the captive's head, not the keen edge, and with a shrill, mocking laugh the Mad Detective gave a vigorous shake, then rapped that skull against the tree-trunk until it rattled again; proof sufficient that the scalping-act had been naught but pretense, since the hairy thatch still clung to the fellow's skull.

But for the moment Otto Brandagee was past knowing this. That horrible fear had caused his senses to flee, and his form hung limp and nerveless, kept from falling to earth only by the double turn of the stout rope around his middle.

For a brief space Crazy Jack seemed wholly taken aback, one hand slowly brushing over his eyes as he gazed stupidly at that suddenly collapsing figure.

Little by little he drew back, still staring perplexedly at his silent prey, unwittingly drawing closer to the merrily blazing fire which he had kindled for the sake of its light rather than for its warmth.

His pendent hand was now almost over that fire, and a tongue of flame suddenly shot up as though eager to lick the flesh, through the falling apart of a glowing brand.

Crazy Jack gave a low ejaculation as he dropped knife to clasp the scorched hand with its mate, staring bewilderedly at the dancing flames, as though they, likewise, formed an enigma too deep and subtle for his shattered wits to fathom.

But, as another dividing stick sent up a tiny shower of brilliant sparks, the madman began to smile, flashing eyes from fire to captive, then back again, present mingling with the past as his next actions and muttered words amply proved.

"Fire burns! Ha! ha! ha! As ye sow, even so shalt thou reap! Fight the devil with fire! And so— Wake up, devil!"

Recovering the knife he had dropped, Crazy Jack picked up a dry stick, one end of which was a glowing coal, and laughing wildly he thrust the brand against the cheek of the unconscious White Cap.

The remedy was all that he could have expected, for, with a choking howl of mingled pain and terror, Brandagee rallied head-jack-

ing back and figure drawing erectly against that supporting trunk.

"Mercy—have pity!" he gasped, though he surely saw no hope for leniency in that fierce, vengeance-filled face. "Don't kill—don't torture me like—"

"Like you and your fellow-imps tortured me, is it?" harshly interrupted the Mad Detective, his empty hand sharply smiting those appealing lips.

"I never—before Heaven, sir, I never helped to—never harmed you or yours in all my life!"

"Liar as well as devil! Tell me now: my wife? my child? Where are they? Where did you carry them when— Speak, ye devil! or I'll tear you limb from limb! I'll rend your bosom wide and pluck forth your foul black heart, to cram it down your lying throat!"

Brandagee strove to speak, but his terror was too intense. Only a husky, inarticulate gurgle could find birth in his parched throat.

Possible Crazy Jack had sufficient wit left alive to realize something of this truth, for he abruptly changed his manner, sweeping a curved palm over his face, leaving it cold and composed so far as outward semblance went.

And when he spoke again, his voice had changed to correspond.

"Though you be a devil, surely that does not make you a fool? Then, why try to deny what can't be disputed? I know you. I have your face printed upon my brain in lines of scarlet—printed in my own blood, you then jeering, mocking, laughing, pitiless demon from Hades!"

Again something of that maniacal fire flashed to the surface, but Crazy Jack checked himself like one reproving a glaring fault.

Those tones were so mild by comparison that the wretch plucked up a little courage, huskily speaking:

"I swear I never injured you, sir! I'll make oath on the Bible—"

"Liar!" harshly interrupted the Mad Detective, casting aside the now nearly extinguished brand, but snatching up a fresh one to take its place. "Must I freshen your memory again—like this?"

With swift, light touches he brushed that glowing coal across the face of the White Cap, laughing grimly as Brandagee vainly strove to escape the exquisite torture by swinging his head from side to side as far as his bonds would permit.

"Speak, ye lying imp of Satan! Confess! Tell me all, or—this slight taste shall become a full meal! Answer me, you howling whelp, or the scent of your roasting hide shall summon hither all the wolves, the cats, the buzzards, the—"

"Don't— Oh, have pity, sir!"

"Aye! pity such as you showed to me, dog of the devil! Such mercy as your hellish crew meted forth to— Where are they, you hound? Where is my wife? Where is my child—my Pearl?"

With every sentence that searing brand touched the already blistered face of the White Cap, whose howls of pain seemed to fill the air for rods around that little island of live-oaks.

"Don't—I'll tell—everything, you devil!" screamed Brandagee, in the extremity of torture hardly conscious of what he was promising.

At that first positive sign of yielding, Crazy Jack flung aside the brand he had put to such thorough service, flashing forth his knife instead. And making this glitter and flash in the red glow of the fire, he sternly spoke:

"Do that, then, you cur! Tell me all I wish to know, else I'll flay you inch by inch, and cram the strips of quivering hide down your lying throat as food to lend you strength to live on and suffer—aye! to suffer ten thousand thousand deaths, all linked into one!"

Groaning over his burns, feeling almost as though death would prove a blessing rather than a curse, just so it might come swift and immediate, Otto Brandagee gasped forth something—he hardly realized what.

"The truth, you craven whelp! Tell me of my wife where is she, now? Speak, I say, or—the knife shall be your reward!"

"I don't— Colonel Cowl's got her yet!"

hoarsely cried the terrified wretch, those words coming into his mouth as a memory of the veiled woman whom the White Hood Chief held in such strange bondage flashed across his bewildered brain.

Crazy Jack stared at the speaker, his face turning ghastly pale as he seemed striving hard to realize just what those words meant. He brushed a hand across his face, but still he could not wholly comprehend the truth.

"I don't— Surely I had a wife? Can it be all a dream? Was I not— Oh, you pitiless demons!" clasping his hands and flinging them over his head in a despairing gesture as his face turned upward as well. "Was it not enough that ye robbed me of my wife, my child, my all? Was it not enough that— Could ye not leave me my brain?"

That glittering blade fell unheeded from his grasp, and lying there only a short distance from the bound White Cap, its reflections caused him to experience a sudden thrill of wild hope.

If he could only clutch that weapon! One swift slash across the lasso would set him at liberty, then another stroke—ah! how surely he would drive the keen blade home!

But even as the trembling wretch was on the point of risking all by flinging his body forward, clutching at the weapon, Crazy Jack rallied, and again faced his enemy, speaking slowly, like one whose throat is very sore:

"I asked you about my child, my Pearl, devil! Where is she, now? Show me how I can regain my little girl, or I'll kill you like a mad wolf!"

That ray of hope seemed to quicken the wits of the prisoner, and as the Mad Detective spoke slowly on, he recalled the terms of that enigmatical note which Captain Cowl had given him to hand Colonel Lawrence Beaumont, of the Lazy B Ranch.

"A Pearl of great price!"

If the White Cap Chief had meant a jewel, would he have inserted a capital letter there? And—had not this insane demon greeted Blanche Beaumont as his Pearl? Then, surely, he might risk it, when the penalty for silence was death through merciless torture!

All this flashed through the brain of the prisoner with marvelous rapidity, and by the time the painfully speaking Mad Detective had come to an ending, he was resolved to make the venture.

Only, could he not first drive a bargain with this demon?

"If I tell you where your child now is, sir, you will let me go my way, unhurt and unharmed?" he asked, valuing striving to speak with firm tones, but managing to make his meaning understood.

"Can you tell me?" eagerly asked the madman, coming a trifle closer. "Do you know where my child, my Pearl now is?"

"I know, and I can tell you just that, sir!" with growing confidence asserted the White Cap. "But, swear that I may go free as reward for giving back this lost child to your arms!"

"Tell me! I promise—all, everything! Only—quick, ye devil! My child is—where may I find her, then?"

"Colonel Cowl stole away your wife and child, sir," swiftly spoke Brandagee, hitting on the actual truth even while he more than half-believed he was flatly lying for dear life. "He has your wife still with him, but the child—"

"My Pearl! Go on—where is my sweet darling, then?"

"At the Crazy B Ranch. You saw her only— Great heavens!"

For the Mad Detective fell in his tracks, as though stricken by lightning.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ONE INCH FOR REVENGE!

WITHOUT sound or cry, Crazy Jack fell to earth like one smitten by a bolt from out the blue.

Otto Brandagee gave a panting cry and shrunk as far away as the nature of his bonds would permit, glaring at that nerveless heap like one suspecting a still more devilish snare underlying the strange action. For the moment he failed to realize the truth.

Little by little that dawned upon his confused wits, for Jack lay just as he had fallen, making no sign, moving not a limb, looking more than ever like one suddenly claimed by grim death as a victim.

For so many long and weary years the insane father had wandered far and wide, ever seeking for the lost child, ever asking for what he must long since have despaired of ever finding, only for the fact of his being insane. And now—to be so suddenly told that he had met that missing child face to face, had even spoken with her, yet passed on without recognition; that had proven the final straw, and his shattered brain had succumbed to the great shock.

For, if not dead, would that bloodthirsty demon be lying so long in such an awkward position? If still alive, would he longer postpone the vengeance he had so craftily won?

And as another brand broke near its center, causing the ruddy flame to leap high toward those overhanging boughs, the red light flickered athwart that bared blade, and once again a fierce, vicious hope leaped up in the bosom of the White Cap.

"If I only had it!" he thought, eyes gleaming even more brightly than did that bit of polished steel. "If I only might—just one good stroke with its edge across this cursed lariat! And then—Ha!"

A sudden shudder seemed to shake that prostrate mass of skins and ragged cloth. A gurgle came from the lungs of the fallen avenger, and then, spasmodically, not consciously, he partly turned, his face coming uppermost with that ruddy glow accentuating his strong, gaunt features.

Alive! Recovering from the strange fit into which he had so suddenly fallen! And still in bonds—still defenseless against—

With greatest difficulty Brandagee choked back the howl of vicious despair which found birth in his soul, terribly frightened, yet still with a remnant of his native cunning staying by him

If he could only reach that knife!

Both arms were pinned fast to his side by the double turn of the Mad Detective's lasso, and that fact seemed to render his wild hopes still less probable; but, knowing that he must escape now, if ever, Otto Brandagee fell to work with fierce energy, twisting and swaying head and shoulders, lifting first one arm and then its mate, trying his level best to tear at least one arm from under those infernal folds!

For a few minutes, each one of which seemed hours in length, his uttermost efforts were foiled; but, little by little his right arm worked upward, his right hand began to feel the coils tearing its skin and straining its sinews; but what mattered that, just so he could—Thank Heaven!

That arm came free, and with a half-smothered roar of savage exultation the White Cap flung the upper portion of his person forward, wildly clutching at the tempting weapon which lay—less than half a foot beyond the tips of his quivering fingers!

So near, and yet so terribly far!

If he could only touch it, even with a finger-nail! If he could but coax that precious bit of steel nearer—close enough for his hot and itching palm to caress that dull haft!

Parting, gasping, straining until the blood flowed into his brain and made his ears roar like distant thunder! And—still those terrible inches away!

Brandagee ceased his furious efforts for the moment, finding it no easy matter to draw himself back and against the tree-trunk, so horrible had been that weight of black blood.

He forced himself to wait until he could again begin to see, until that warning mist of blood faded away from over his eyes; then he tried to push those coils of rope further down his body, hoping thus to win a little greater freedom of movement, and perhaps play enough to enable him to secure that priceless weapon.

If he only might!

That possession meant his freedom, his very life! And it meant more than that: it meant revenge upon the crazy demon who had so savagely tortured him! It meant swift and complete vengeance for all those

of his fellow White Caps who had succumbed to this blood-sucking monster!

Again the stricken man gave a choking groan and a convulsive shudder, his bony hands quivering violently as they reached forth from his body, one falling only a few inches from where that naked blade marked the dun earth.

Half crazed with fear lest he should be cheated after all, the White Cap once more flung himself forward, straining every nerve to reach that coveted instrument, gasping with fierce joy as he saw that former space lessened until—ha! He could touch the metal-bound end of the horn handle!

In his mad eagerness the struggling wretch was too hasty for his own success, for, instead of drawing the weapon nearer to him, his itching finger-tip pushed it further away!

Wild, fiercer yet he strained his every muscle, but that first mad effort seemed to have marked the very limit of his powers, and now—a full inch of space divided finger-tip and haft!

That red blur came over his eyes again, and a hoarse, choking cry broke from the hampered wretch's lips as he now hung helplessly over those cutting coils of rope.

And then—what meant those strange, confusing tones? Whose hands were these, closing upon his person as though—

"Off, ye devil! Don't murder—mercy!"

Such were the words that came from the lips of the White Cap, although he could hardly be said to be conscious of giving them birth.

Those hands lifted his body upward, thus prolonging his life-lease, for a few minutes longer in that terribly strained posture would surely have terminated in apoplexy.

Those hands removed the lasso which bound him to the live-oak, lowering him down in a comfortable position, then turned their attention toward the still insensible lunatic.

Little by little Brandagee recovered his eyesight, rallying his bodily powers as he looked upon those beings who had saved him from what must soon have been death.

One was an aged man with kindly face, the other was young and handsome. And then—a third figure suddenly came within his comparatively limited field of vision, and the White Cap immediately recognized the Yankee tramp, whom he had first seen when standing at bay behind the horse ridden by Blanche Beaumont!

The glad cry which announced this recognition drew all eyes his way, but Nathan Wintergreen, who was leading the horse from which the lasso of Crazy Jack had jerked the White Cap, gave him no time for explanations or for asking questions.

"Here's your nag, you rascal," he said, with cold directness. "Climb into the saddle and rack out if you value life! If Crazy Jack claps eyes on you again, salt won't begin to save you!"

Trembling with dread, the rascal obeyed, climbing upon his horse and fleeing as swiftly as he dared risk, without leaving behind him one word of thanks, of pledges to lead a more reputable life in the future.

"Who is he, Ready?" asked Leo Crawford, leaving the Mad Detective to the skilled ministrations of "Father" Dolliver for the moment.

The counterfeit Yankee tramp quickly told how Crazy Jack had chased Otto Brandagee to the Lazy B Ranch, and the rest was readily guessed.

The messenger quickly told the lover of the rendezvous made by Blanche Beaumont for the ensuing evening, and when all was perfectly understood, Crazy Jack, still insensible but bidding fair to pull through with life, if not with restored reason, was carefully supported upon Red Ghost, then led away through the night in the direction of Black Jack Ranch.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT THE COTTONWOOD SPRINGS.

ANOTHER day had come and gone, and nothing had taken place on the Lazy B Ranch to cause either Blanche or the Yankee tramp any serious anxiety, so far as keeping that rendezvous was concerned.

With the first rays of the rising sun, Jefferson Beaumont, accompanied by Ike

Bronson, had taken horse and ridden swiftly away, no one save themselves appearing to know just whither.

Colonel Beaumont had gone his customary rounds that morning, then retreated to his private sanctum, where he seemed deeply engaged over—that only himself could have explained.

Without running the risk of seeking an actual interview with the young lady who could hardly be expected to hold aught in common with such a disreputable looking tramp as himself, the "Green Mounting Boy" contrived to catch her anxious eye, and by a single eloquent gesture told the maiden all was arranged as she would have it.

That would have satisfied Dick Ready, daring though he undeniably was, but Blanche grew uneasy as the day lengthened, and finally managed to gain a few seconds' speech with "Nathan Wintergreen."

That brief space was sufficiently long for him to tell her how he had seen both Leo Crawford and Parson Dolliver, and to give her full assurance that both would be in waiting at the Cottonwood Springs, the coming evening.

"And you, my lady? You will not fail us, then?" he added, earnestly.

"I will be there, if I am alive!" was the maiden's firm response.

And so it was that once again Blanche Beaumont stole cautiously out of the house where so many of her youthful years had been spent, but which she was abandoning now with only a sad regret for the dear woman who had been to her all an own mother could have been.

As for the living, they had forfeited her love, her respect.

As on the evening before, Blanche succeeded in leaving the house without discovery. Or, if seen at all, those who saw made no attempt to delay, much less hinder her flight.

Quickening her pace as she increased the distance between herself and the home-building, Blanche was not long in reaching the cover where Dick Ready had promised to be in waiting, and where she now found him, holding the bridles of two horses fully equipped for the road.

Blanche gave a choking little cry of pleasure as she recognized her own pet steed, and that intelligent creature whimpered softly as it nuzzled her hand with velvety muzzle.

"Don't let him whicker if you can hinder it, Miss Blanche," hurriedly said Ready, with an uneasy glance around them. "'Twas a big risk, and I really ought to have taken the nags directly to the Springs, but—there's nothing more to wait for, I believe?"

"Nothing, only—there is nothing, sir," hurriedly answered the maiden, her heart in so wild a flutter at this important step that she hardly knew what she might be saying.

Dick Ready quickly assisted her into the saddle, then mounted in turn, walking their nags slowly lest the sudden echo of hoof-strokes should awaken awkward curiosity.

Then, as the Lazy B Ranch faded from sight in the dim starlight, Ready began talking in lively tones, jesting and gossiping, caring little what nonsense crossed his lips, just so he might keep the maiden from falling a prey to the natural fears which now assailed her.

But as the trees which had given a name to that rare collection of huddling springs began to loom up before them, his task was ended.

For, coming swiftly forward with hands extended in joyous greeting, Leo Crawford took full possession of the maiden, who yielded to his loving clasp with an exclamation of intense joy and grateful relief.

Smothering something very like a sob, Dick Ready passed on, to dismount from his horse at the Springs, where Parson Dolliver was in waiting, his bared head showing white as a mound of snow there under the stars.

Together the twain talked in guarded tones until, after a few joyous minutes had flown by on the wings of love, Blanche and Leo came up to complete the quartette.

The aged minister of the Gospel took the outstretched hands of the maiden between his own as she sprang from the saddle to

greet him. He drew her closer, pressing a fatherly kiss upon her forehead, then gently said:

"Come, my daughter, I have a few words to say which, perhaps, had best be spoken to your ears alone."

"Go with him, Blanche," said Crawford, quickly, with true lovely dexterity securing one of her trembling hands for the instant, giving it an encouraging pressure while adding.

"And, dearest girl, while listening to Father Dolliver, pray don't forget Leo Crawford!"

"You can safely trust your interests in my hands, son," gravely answered the minister, moving slowly away with the maiden, afterward.

While that interview lasted, the two young men stood nearer the Springs, conversing in low tones, Dick Ready giving an account of how he had managed matters at the Lazy B Ranch; and then, when nothing further remained to be explained, the parson and Blanche retraced their steps, to be more than eagerly met by the ardent lover.

"You have gained her consent, sir? You will marry me now, Blanche, my angel? Oh, don't say that—What?"

This in answer to a sharp, fierce exclamation from Dick Ready, who had just then caught a suspicious rustle among the reeds and low bushes which marked the course of the waste-water as it flowed away from the Springs proper.

"Down them, Ikel!" shrilly screamed a man who dashed through that tangled cover, firing as he came, the red spouts of flame making it possible for the surprised quartette to recognize young Beaumont.

A little to one side came a second figure, likewise playing trigger as he crossed the muddy rill in a panther-like bound; and as his first bullet sharply stung the seeming Yankee, Ready gave a vengeful cry, his own weapon leaping forth from its hiding-place and beginning to bark right viciously.

With a howling curse of agony Ike Bronson tumbled in a heap, even as his feet touched the damp earth, and then, filled with the mad fury of fighting, the athletic actor darted forward to meet young Beaumont.

That individual had tripped over a root that lay near the muddy surface into which his weight forced that leg past the ankle, and thus his lead sped wild, doing no injury to the rival whom he hated so venomously.

"Hal what a fal was there, my countrymen!" cried the actor, as the cursing rival fell sprawling, pistol flying out of his grasp at the same time. "Come to me arms, thou blooming chump! Come and—Here thou goest, even though thou wert a mountain of flesh and healthy muscle!"

Grasping the young man about his middle, Ready jerked his ankle free from the clasp of the root, and whirling him bodily into the air, he made a plunge toward the Springs, near which Ike Bronson lay groaning, helpless for the time being.

"Go into soak, young hot-head!" cried the actor, pitching the young fellow headlong into a miry crossing where stock were wont to ford the waste waters. "Take a mud bath and cool off, Jefferson!"

That vicious yell of mad fury was smothered as he plunged clean to the shoulders in that miry pool, and leaving him floundering there, knowing that he was safely disposed of for the moment, Dick Ready wheeled, just in time to miss catching a bullet between his broad shoulders.

Ike Bronson was struggling to rise, and giving a vicious curse as he saw his first murderous attempt fail, he strove to fire another shot.

But Ready was upon him, kicking the revolver out of his bruised fingers, then savagely driving his heavy heel squarely into that evil visage, knocking the cowboy back with all sense driven out of his thick skull.

This was his first chance for fairly catching his breath, and Dick Ready now caught the sounds of faint shouts, mingled with the deep-toned baying of hounds, all plainly telling him that the alarm had spread to Lazy B Ranch. An instant later he cried, sharply.

"To horse, all! And—marry 'em on the jump, parson, or all's lost!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

COLONEL COWL TAKES A TUMBLE.

ALTHOUGH Blanche did not understand just what it meant, she heard the sounds which indicated an arrival at the Ranch, only a few minutes before she left her chamber and stole down the flight of stairs on her way to keep the rendezvous given Leo Crawford.

That arrival proved to be anything but an agreeable surprise to Lawrence Beaumont, for he had a remarkably good memory for faces, and even before this stranger made the announcement, he believed he could recall the features of the man who, so many long years before, had left the frightened little girl in their custody.

"Bear me company, if you please, sir," he uttered, after that first greeting was over. "Wait: we can converse with greater comfort in my private apartment, sir."

Although there were only servants within eye or ear-shot, just then, Colonel Beaumont feared to ask any questions as to name or mission of this tall, handsome stranger where others might hear his reply.

"Wholly at your service, sir," courteously said the unknown, bowing low, then following the lead of his present host.

The ranchero closed the door behind them, turning key in lock like one who has no intention of risking an untimely intrusion. His visitor smiled grimly at this precaution, his dark eyes flashing keenly over his present surroundings, then he crossed over to the shuttered window and gave its fastenings a quick but comprehensive examination.

"If you fear spies, sir," began Beaumont, only to be cut short by the words:

"Well, not exactly that, my dear sir, but since I've reached the years of discretion, I never thrust my head into a hole without making sure there is some manner of getting it out again!"

"Sir, what am I to understand by such words?"

"You locked the door and withdrew the key, didn't you?"

"Merely to insure us against accidental interruption, sir, not—"

"And I merely wished to satisfy myself whether it wouldn't be easier to break out through these shutters than to kick down your door," coolly declared the visitor, his superb mustaches curling upward under a mocking smile.

Colonel Beaumont quickly replaced key in lock, but left the bolt shot, then came over to the chair at the table on the side opposite to that where his cool caller had found a seat for himself.

"I can hardly think your sole purpose in coming here, sir, was to insult one who, as your host, is unable to properly resent such words," gravely began the veteran, gazing steadily into the face opposite. "Now, will you be so kind as to tell me your name and your business, sir?"

That smile broadened into a low, amused laugh as he who wore it pictured to himself the probable results of such a frank statement.

What would this wealthy ranchero do or say if he knew that, seated within the reach of his long right arm, was none other than the noted and notorious smuggler, raider, rustler, desperado-in-general, Captain Cowl, head and front of the lawless aggregation now known far and wide as the White Cap Gang?

Colonel Beaumont frowned at that laughter, clearly losing control of his naturally fiery temper; and seeing this, Captain Cowl spoke out:

"You can call me Illingsworth, sir, for lack of a better name, and as for my mission—you received the greeting I sent you, only a day or two ago, sir?"

That flushed face turned pale, although Lawrence Beaumont had instinctively divined the truth. After a brief pause, he slowly asked:

"What manner of greeting do you allude to, sir?"

There were writing materials lying on the table, and taking possession of these, Captain Cowl swiftly wrote out the enigmatical sentence which had been delivered to Beaumont by the hand of Otto Brandt.

"Let that answer you, sir," he said, pushing the paper across to his present host.

"By comparing it with the other, you can decide for yourself whether or no the same hand scrawled them both!"

For a full minute Colonel Beaumont sat motionless, gazing at those boldly-shaped characters, then he looked up, his face pale but his eyes glowing and his tones steady as they were cold.

"You can explain the full meaning of this, sir?"

"Why not, since your comprehension is so limited?" almost insolently retorted the White Hood Chief. "I am the man who left a little child in your keeping, fifteen years ago. Now—having given you fair warning that I should do so, I've come to reclaim that ward, Lawrence Beaumont!"

"Fifteen years! A long time—a very long time, sir!" slowly uttered the ranchero. "And during all of those years, not one word from—what if I say to you, Mr. Illingsworth, that you have mistaken both place and man?"

"Do you mean to deny the fact of my leaving such a child in your care, Colonel Beaumont?"

"If not exactly that, sir, I can at least assert that you have forfeited all rights which you might otherwise have held, by lapse of time. That child is now a lady grown, and—my legally adopted daughter!"

"Then, of course, sir, you can produce the necessary documents? You can point to the consent and signature of her actual parents?"

"She is my daughter, sir, not only by adoption, but by care, by love, by the tender bonds knitted fast through all these long years!"

"Against which I present the ties of birth, of blood, of nature," as swiftly retorted Captain Cowl. "And now, sir, I claim my child!"

"I could hold possession against all your claims, Mr. Illingsworth, but I will not resort to such measures. Blanche shall be given her free choice. If she prefers to go with you, her choice—"

"'Tis my choice, sir, and as her father—"

"She can go with you," coldly finished Beaumont, paying no heed to that rude interruption, rising from his chair. "I will call my daughter, sir, and you can receive her decision from her own lips."

Leaving the door open behind him, Colonel Beaumont called to Blanche, but without reply. Then he sent the housekeeper up to her chamber, and, when that was found empty, set the entire ranch in an uproar over that strange vanishment.

Then the truth could no longer be doubted; Blanche had fled, and when it was reported to the colonel that "Nathan Wintergreen" was nowhere to be found, his rage fairly burst bonds, and for a few seconds the old soldier raged like a madman.

That was the tidings he felt forced to carry to the impatiently waiting visitor, and then the smoldering rage of the White Hood Chief did leap forth in fire and fury!

"It's all a foul scheme to trick me out of my legal rights, you infernal bilk!" he cried, leaping to his feet and shaking a clinched fist fairly in the face of the old soldier. "But, I'll play even with you, and brand you as a dirty, lying whelp who—"

Swift as thought Lawrence Beaumont launched a blow straight from the shoulder, and, stricken squarely between the eyes, Captain Cowl was knocked clear off his feet, flying back, headlong, to shake the house as he came to the floor!

"Drag him out, lads!" sternly cried the ranchero, to such of his men as had been attracted to the spot by that growing excitement. "Don't do him any further injury. Put him on his horse and send him away, with his life. Mind: he who draws a drop of his blood, unless in self-defense, shall answer to me for the disobedience of orders! Now—out he goes!"

And out he did go, too! And almost before he could comprehend just how he had come to take such a stunning tumble, Captain Cowl was in the saddle, dizzily galloping away from Lazy B Ranch!

And Colonel Beaumont? No longer doubting the stern truth, since nothing could be found of either Blanche or

of the Yankee tramp whom Jefferson Lee had so fiercely denounced as a spy, the enraged veteran bade his men prepare for the road, and commanded the hounds to be put in leash long enough to point out the direction that flight had taken.

Scenting a worn shoe which was brought from the maiden's chamber, the hounds gave free tongue as they struck off the right scent!

CHAPTER XXX.

JUMPING THE WRONG GAME.

THANKS to all this confusion and intense excitement, not one of them all at Lazy B Ranch noticed the sounds which came floating through the still night from the direction of Cottonwood Springs, only a scant mile away.

Thanks to that, as well, many precious moments were cut to waste which, otherwise improved by Colonel Beaumont and his men, might easily have altered the entire course of events, making or marring more life than one on that memorable night.

Quickly as the hounds puzzled out the scent, it took time. And what with making certain that Blanche was nowhere about the house, and learning past all doubt that the counterfeit tramp from Yankeedom had likewise taken wings to his heels, all was over at the Springs long before the keen-scented dogs led their master to the little timber-island under cover of which Nathan Wintergreen had held horses until the coming of his fair companion.

Here the burning of a few matches was sufficient to give those keen eyes and keener wits the right clue, and, once more cursing his folly in not giving greater credence to the report brought by his son, Colonel Beaumont urged his men onward, bidding them recover the maiden, but—

"Kill that cursed spy! A thousand dollars to the man who kills that infernal Yankee fraud!"

It was not so difficult a matter to put the hounds upon the fresh trail, but several more minutes were lost in making the brutes understand just what was wanted; and where so much was at stake, each second was almost beyond price.

Thus it came about, then, that the hastily-armed and mounted force from Lazy B Ranch rode direct for the Cottonwood Springs, led by the baying hounds who had been set free from leash as soon as it was made clear that the fugitives had taken horse in place of fleeing further on foot.

And there, as they came nearer, arose the hoarse, savage shouts from one who was hardly recognizable when the excited company galloped up, so thoroughly had that mud-bath done its disguising work!

Here the first positive tidings was had of the missing maiden, and, what the nearly suffocated young man lacked was supplied by the wounded cowboy, Ike Bronson.

He told how they had come by pure chance upon the quartette, and how, learning their intentions at the same time they recognized their identity, they had charged in, meaning to kill both Leo Crawford and the Yankee spy. Instead—

"Rope that devil, boys!" groaningly panted Bronson, badly hurt yet forgetting his injuries in his intense hatred for the man who had laid him so low. "Fetch him to me so's I kin git in my work! I'd give my life for one fair whack at him—now!"

Colonel Beaumont bade one of his men remain to look after the injured cowboy, and then rode on after the hounds, leaving his son by the Springs, trying to wash that clinging mud from his eyes and his throat!

The hounds made an abrupt turn just after leaving the Cottonwood Springs, and then, scarce forty rods further on, they gave tongue with an exultant change of note which plainly announced the fact that game was now fairly afoot!

The light of the full moon rendered objects visible at a considerable distance, there on the comparatively level plain where neither tree nor bush afforded cover, and a fiercely exultant yell burst from the old fox-hunter's lips as he caught sight of two phantom-like figures running swiftly away ahead of the baying hounds!

Even at that distance he could distinguish the difference in dress which marks the sexes,

and knew that, while one of the fugitives was a man, the other just as surely must be a woman!

He did not pause to ask himself how it came that there were but two, where there ought to be four; how it chanced that those who had left the brace of disabled men at Cottonwood Springs, on horseback, were now found here, afoot on the prairie.

"Halt, there!" he cried at the top of his still powerful voice. "It is I—your father, Blanche! Stop, girl! No harm shall come to you, but—kill the devil who's with her, men!" he added, lowering his tones and leaving no possible room for mistake as to his meaning.

Instead of stopping, the fleeing shapes seemed to quicken their pace, the man half-turning, far enough to send back a couple of shots at the eager hounds, now baying almost at their heels.

Fortunately these intelligent creatures, while trained to take and hold a human trail, had been taught never to actually tackle any such game, beyond baying it, whether afoot or treed.

Again and again did Colonel Beaumont call upon his adopted daughter by name, and all the more loudly as the distance lessened yet without any signs of recognition on the part of the fugitives.

If they neither heard nor heeded, there was another party within earshot who did both: no less than Captain Cowl, the Hooded Chief!

After being so ignominiously hustled out of Lazy B Ranch, and sent away through the night on his horse, his wits pretty thoroughly obfuscated, thanks to that sturdy knock-down blow, he lost some little time in rejoining his company of White Caps whom he had left at a safe distance from the ranch-buildings, hoping to succeed in his plans without calling force to his aid.

Guided by the baying of the hounds on scent, the outlaw readily enough divined what was taking place, and so, with a warning word to post his knaves as to their action when the game was fairly jumped, he rode off in hopes of intercepting both game and hunters.

Concealed by a swale where the lush grass grew high enough to afford sufficient cover to serve by moonlight, the White Hood Chief rose in his stirrups far enough to peer along the level beyond, laughing low and viciously as he saw how directly in the line of chase his ambushade was planted.

He could hear Lawrence Beaumont shouting aloud the name of his adopted daughter; and, as the fugitives came near enough for him to distinguish the flowing garments of a woman, he laughed aloud in fierce anticipation; then he swiftly spoke to his men:

"Leave the girl to me, lads! You buck the gang, yonder, and don't die of grief if some of your lead hits hard enough to empty saddles! Shoot to kill, and—Ah! curse it!"

While giving these sanguinary instructions, Colonel Cowl was still watching the chase, and now he broke off with a curse as he saw it come to an end, just a few seconds before he could have wished.

For, despairing of escape by flight, Pedro Morales hoarsely bade his companion flee on; then he wheeled, weapons in hand, to cover her retreat by the sacrifice of his own life, since no less would suffice!

Spit—spat—spang! his pistols spoke, then the yelling cowboys came up, fairly riding him down; but, even as he fell, the desperate Mexican kept his revolvers barking.

With another savage imprecation, Colonel Cowl broke cover, scoring the ribs of his willing steed as they plunged up the steep bank and out upon the level plain.

Hard upon his heels came his White Caps, yelling, brandishing the weapons they were only too anxious to use; but, paying no attention to them, having eyes just then for yonder woman, and for her alone, the veiled outlaw dashed swiftly ahead, firing a shot or two in order to keep back the ranch cowboys, if possible.

Startled by that totally unexpected irruption of armed foemen, coming as it seemed out of the very earth, the men from Lazy B Ranch recoiled, and thus gave the Hooded Chief the very opportunity he wished.

Uttering a sharp cry of terror the woman fled from her companion as he turned to bay;

but, before she could fairly realize her fresh peril, Colonel Cowl swooped down upon them, bending low in his saddle, one arm clasping her waist, to swing her upon the withers of his gallant steed as he wheeled to flee, with a clear, taunting laugh at his foemen.

"You monster!" shrieked the woman, striking him with her dagger.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FACE TO FACE AT LAST.

CAPTAIN COWL gave a sharp yell of amazement as he heard that voice and felt the biting touch of the steel.

Deceived by the loud calling of Lawrence Beaumont, he naturally supposed that fleeing shape to be the maiden of the ranch, against whose peace he was scheming, and in that mad swoop he never detected the difference until "my lady" cried out and brought her weapon into play.

Thanks to her cramped position, the woman's vengeful arm could only imperfectly obey her will, and the abrupt wheeling of the black horse in a measure spoiled her aim.

Still, though it was only a flesh-wound he received, the shock and surprise combined were sufficient to break the hold of the Hooded Chief, and with another cry, Rosalind Rutherford slipped from the horse's withers to the ground.

Although Pedro Morales went down before the fierce charge of the Lazy B cowboys, smarting with wounds and thinking that his last moments had come, he still retained enough of his senses to hear and recognize those shrieks.

He staggered to his feet, plunging blindly forward in the direction from whence those cries had come, forgetting himself, forgetting all save that one thing: the woman he so adored was in danger, and her voice was appealing to him for assistance.

By this time the White Caps had closed in with the cowboys, driving them back more by the surprise than from excess of courage or daring; and thus given a comparatively clear field, even with his death-dimmed vision, Pedro Morales was able to distinguish those two forms: Rosalind just breaking away from her captor, Captain Cowl swaying in his saddle, and clutching at his injured breast with his gloved hand.

"Devil! I swore—for my—lady!" hoarsely panted the Mexican, as he lunged forward, firing the last couple of shots from his weapon.

The lead went widely astray, for the poor fellow was even then reeling for his last fall, his eyes turned blind all at once.

Rosalind came running toward him, confused and hardly knowing which way she was going, after that fall.

Her flight more than aught else led to the White Hood Chief recognizing his lieutenant, and with a fresh suspicion flashing across his excited brain, he gave a savage yell and charged upon that falling figure, the chest of the black horse striking Morales and knocking him down.

A wrench of that iron hand lifted the snorting steed upon its hind legs; then those madly pawing hoofs came down with a horrible sound!

At that moment came yet another surprise to add to the record of that most eventful night.

The Lazy B cowboys rallied gallantly under their leader, and recovered the ground they had lost under that reckless charge.

Mixed together in mad confusion, the two bands fought desperately, now with pistols, until the dusty mist was split with blood-red streaks of fire, then closing in a still more deadly grapple as their horses fell in side by side, plying knife with all the fury of demons incarnate rather than sane human beings.

But the weight of numbers was beginning to tell the tale and the White Caps were forcing back the adherents of the Lazy B cause, when another ringing yell rent the night-air, and a strong force of mounted men came charging up to the scene of conflict, their leader shouting aloud:

"Fall out, you honest men! It's the White Caps we're after! Now—down 'em, lads!"

Then again pealed forth the wild, well-known slogan of the Texan Rangers, and

the gallant fellows whose trained charge-cry thus made their identity known, closed in upon the notorious gang, bound to kill or to capture, whichever came handiest!

All of this Colonel Cowl saw during those few brief seconds consumed by his riding down Pedro Morales, and instantly divining the truth, that the Rangers had been trailing his party until darkness came, then had been guided to that spot by the wild uproar of battle, he took steps for his own preservation, caring little what fate might befall his men.

He saw that the White Caps were outnumbered, even without counting in any of the Lazy B outfit, and realizing the folly of offering himself up as an additional sacrifice, he swung his good steed around, leaving the ill-fated Mexican lying motionless where he had fallen, once again bending over to fling a strong arm around the waist of the woman whom he had held in chains for so many years.

Bewildered, hardly knowing what was taking place, Rosalind fell a comparatively easy victim to the White Cap Chief, although she shrieked afresh at that fierce clutch and struggled with what powers were left her to break away from that hated embrace.

"Ah-ha, you she devil!" cried Captain Cowl as he swung the woman clear of the ground and with a mighty heave tossed her across his thighs, at the same time raking the black steed with his spurs to hasten his flight from that scene of carnage. "Thought to trick me, did you? Stole off up here with that treacherous whelp, to run off—What have you done with little Pearl, you wild-cat?"

"Pearl—my baby!" shrieked the half-crazed woman, struggling in his loathsome clutches, giving even his muscular arm all it could do to maintain that grasp.

"Where is she, you fool?" persisted the chief, as they galloped away over the prairie, through the night, leaving those battling forces well to the rear, even so quickly. "You run her off, for I was at the ranch and—The devil!"

At that instant a hoarse, menacing yell came to the ears of the outlaw, and flashing a look to his left front, he saw a single horseman riding so as to intercept his flight!

Like a revelation it came to him that this was Crazy Jack, the Mad Detective!

As though to put an end to all doubts forever, the wild rider cried out:

"At last, ye devil! At last—at last!"

With a savage anathema Captain Cowl whipped out a revolver and opened fire upon his deadly enemy, but Rosalind was still struggling to free herself, shrieking frantically as the heavily-charged weapon spoke so close to her imperiled head.

Laughing insanely, the Mad Avenger came charging down upon the black steed.

Captain Cowl, seeing that his lead was going astray, hurled Rosalind clear of his horse, and fired point blank at Crazy Jack.

An instant later the swiftly charging Red Ghost struck the black steed a quivering blow on the chest then all went down together, men and animals!

As they fell, Crazy Jack grasped the White Hood Chief, holding on to his muscular throat with true bull-dog tenacity throughout that shock, the fall, the rolling over and over, then—like wild beasts the two men fought, their swift writhings obscured by the dust they stirred up from the sun-parched prairie.

That death grapple was far too savage to be of long duration, and Rosalind had hardly time to lift her head from the grass into which she had been so rudely flung, than the antagonists separated.

One lay there quivering, as if in the silent agonies of death, the other slowly lifting himself up, sweeping a blood-wet hand across his face as though to clear his vision.

Then, with a low, choking cry he sprang to his feet and staggered toward the woman, gaspingly speaking as he came:

"Rosalind—my wife—at last!"

A brief space of bewildered doubt; then she flung up her arms and fell into his embrace, sobbing wildly, yet filled with delicious joy.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE END OF THE MAN HUNT.

That tragic night was fairly spent before the various tangles were straightened out

and matters sufficiently cleared up for those more intimately concerned to reach a fair understanding.

The Rangers won a comparatively easy victory over the White Caps, who had already suffered no slight loss at the hands of the Lazy B cowboys, and with the exception of a few of the more lucky, who had thought more of flight than of fighting when the slogan of the Texas Rangers burst upon their startled hearing, the lawless gang had been well accounted for, as dead or prisoners.

An understanding was readily reached between the Rangers and the force under Colonel Beaumont, and a hasty search was made for the still missing maiden, which resulted in the discovery of—her own mother!

To be sure that relationship did not come out at that time, but before the bewildered colonel could finally understand the error into which he had fallen, at first glimpse of that fleeing figure, Rosalind Rutherford at least knew that this was the man in whose charge her baby daughter had been placed by her worst enemy, fifteen years before.

She made no claims, just then, for she was sorely grieving over the wounded, senseless form of her long-missing husband, Waldene Rutherford—he who had become notorious in that vast stock-range as "Crazy Jack, the Mad Detective."

A hasty examination failed to reveal any necessarily mortal injury, and giving the grieving wife hope that all would be well with her husband when he had time to rally from the shock he surely must have recently received, a guard was left with them, and another in charge of Captain Cowl, the White Hood Chief, who was discovered hard by, seriously wounded, but still with life lingering in his body.

Little realizing what intense interest those three persons were fated to hold for him and for his, Colonel Beaumont partly explained his mission abroad that night, to the leader of the Rangers, and the latter promptly offered to join him in his further quest.

He had a double motive in making this offer: he wished to assist a distressed father, but, at the same time, he meant to prevent any further bloody work if possible.

Yet, before the new party thus formed had more than fairly gotten under headway, facing toward the Spider Ranch, where Colonel Beaumont thought it most likely the eloping lovers would make their first halt, a venerable figure, riding a steady-going old mare, came across their front and called a peaceable halt.

"You, Father Dolliver?" ejaculated the old soldier, turning almost ghastly pale at that recognition, for as by instinct he realized the disagreeable truth.

"I, Colonel Beaumont," answered the minister of the gospel, bowing gravely to those armed raiders. "And I am only sorry that every man astir this night has not as peaceful a mission."

"You are—My daughter, parson?" faltered the old soldier.

"Sends you a daughter's love, sir, and begs in return a father's forgiveness. Surely you will give that, sir? As a Christian gentleman you dare not send her away to begin her new life—"

"Then—where is she?" My little girl is—speak, can't you, man?"

"Your daughter is with her husband, Leo Crawford, colonel."

Then the old soldier did burst bonds, cursing and raving, breathing direst threats against all who had dared to thwart his cherished plans, to bring his fondest hopes to worse than naught.

But, that was too fierce to last long; and before many minutes more the veteran was almost humbly begging the minister's pardon, after which he listened in gloomy silence to the parson's story of that truly romantic wedding; for, as Dick Ready had suggested, Father Dolliver did "marry 'em on the jump!"

With the curses of their defeated enemies following them, with the deep-toned baying of the trailing hounds booming in their ears, as they rode away at a gallop from Cottonwood Springs, the true-lovers clasped hands and were duly wedded by the honest parson!

The knowledge that Blanche was now fairly out of his power, helped Lawrence

Beaumont to bear up under the truly astounding revelations which were all made the day following that eventful night; for, on litters constructed for that particular purpose, both "Crazy Jack" and "Captain Cowl" were conveyed to the Lazy B Ranch, there to make clear what had been a bewildering mystery for so many years.

Not until he was positively assured that his injuries were mortal, and that he could not possibly live to see that day's sun climb up to the zenith, did the White Hood Chief yield his savage will.

Terror now claimed him as its prey, and begging for a longer lease of life in which he might repent his manifold sins, he made full confession.

He was not Albert Illingsworth, but his twin brother, Elbert! And at the time when that twin brother wooed and won the fair Rosalind, only to blast her young life by returning to his criminal career, Elbert Illingsworth was "doing time" in an Eastern State for manslaughter!

For that reason Albert never spoke of his brother to his sweetheart nor to his wife, for the twins were passionately attached to each other, and Albert was not yet ready to let Rosalind know what they were, in reality.

Albert Illingsworth was really killed while trying to escape, and the corpse taken from the river was actually his.

Then, having served his time out, Elbert Ellingsworth lost not a day in probing to the very bottom the few rumors he had caught concerning that tragedy; and, that done, he settled down to wreaking a terrible revenge.

Death alone would be all too light a penalty, he told himself, and so he patiently bided his time until he felt there could be no failure in the workings of his plans, and until he felt the blows would fall with the most crushing force.

He really intended to bring the daughter back to the mother, and, presenting Blanche, or Pearl, as his bride, show Rosalind the positive proofs of such a marriage, knowing that by so doing he would be torturing the woman who would naturally believe him her legal husband, more exquisitely than by aught else he could invent!

Instead, he rushed blindly to his own death, and that at the hands of Waldene Rutherford, whom he had wronged so hideously.

For nearly two long days the husband lay sleeping—it could not be rightly called stupor—then he awoke in full possession of his senses, no longer "Crazy Jack, the Mad Detective!"

Jefferson Lee would not listen to a reconciliation, and when his father persisted in asking Blanche and her husband to pay her long-lost mother a brief visit, at the same time receiving his blessing, the son took horse and rode away toward San Antonio.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but Lawrence Beaumont proved himself equal to the occasion, and the blushing bride, the happy groom, the laughing "best man," who no longer figured as a Yankee tramp, all bowed before his dignified yet kindly greeting.

A few words will suffice to sum up the rest.

Elbert Illingsworth died, before noon, and was buried by the cowboys that same night. His men who had been taken prisoners, were taken away by the Rangers, to answer for their crimes to the law.

Ike Bronson recovered from his wounds, and before six months had passed over his head, frankly and honestly vowed that he'd never more despise a Yankee, for Nathan Wintergreen had thoroughly converted him!

Waldene Rutherford and his wife, Rosalind, settled down close to their daughter and her husband, in the Texas city; but, though remaining sane for the rest of his life, the sorely-tried man faded away with the autumn, and when winter came, it marked his grave with the first flakes of snow.

"The fair Rosalind" is still living, and bids fair to live long enough to train up a small regiment of "infantry," since she already has two to dote over!

And the "Yankee Tramp?" Well, the grateful lover "staked" him, and setting out with a traveling troupe of his own, Dick Ready is more than flourishing, bidding fair to become a veritable magnate in his line!

THE END.

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